**Sustainability in the Religious Sources of Western Culture**

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**Introduction**

Discussions about sustainability or actually non-sustainability primarily focus on the relationship between human beings and nature. The complexity of the issue derives from the idea that humans are the masters and owners of nature. The cultural approach popular in Western civilization maintains that humans are separate from nature and dominate it; this approach shapes humanity’s attitude towards the planet, and the plants and animals that inhabit it. In this paper, I will present the cultural and religious roots of this concept in Judeo-Christian monotheism – based on the biblical text, particularly the myth of Creation in the book of Genesis. Humanity’s alienation from nature forms an axis that passes throughout the history of Western culture. It is firmly established on deep religious foundations that develop into secular modes.

Religion is a typical hallmark of culture. Systems of thought and cultural values are reflected in the religious doctrines of a given culture. The culture and Christian religion of the West are based on the Jewish scriptures, which were spread across the Roman Empire. Christianity has based itself on the canonical Bible along with additional Jewish texts. Those were cut off the Jewish canon by Rabbinic Judaism over 1,500 years ago, and have remained doubtful ever since (Malkin 2003, 44). The Bible is perceived by both religions as a sacred text, absolute truth, and a product of divine revelation. The Lutheran Reformation further strengthened the importance of the scriptures, while the Catholic Church augmented the authority of the scriptures with that of tradition. Luther, however, denied this traditional authority with the argument of Sola Scriptura; that the Bible should be read not because it is open to individual interpretation, but because it is the most coherent book. The Reformation has thus placed the Jewish scriptures at the heart of European identity (HaCohen 2006, 23). Thus, we explore the roots of the Western cultural perception of the separation of Man from nature, as well as man’s control over nature, through an examination of biblical texts.

Man’s separation from nature in the Bible is manifested in two ways: first is the separation of divinity from nature; and second is the separation of man from nature, his position as supreme in the hierarchy of all creatures, lord of all creation, and his ability to participate in creating natural reality.

**The Separation of God from Nature**

The conception of the world as by a creator who determines the design of all things according to his will is agreed upon by the three monotheistic religions and is rooted in the Bible. The God of the Bible is described as an independent entity, an entity separate from both nature and man. “The fundamental idea of the Israelite faith was bound from the beginning to a total split between God and the world … God and the world are two beings.” (Kaufmann 1971, 245) According to Kaufmann, the crucial difference between idolatry and biblical faith is not limited to the question of multiple gods versus a single god, but extends also to the essence of God and his attitude towards the world. The God of Israel is not enslaved to nature or to matter; he is the creator of nature by the power of his sovereign will. God does not battle fate or time, because he is “calling the generations from the beginning” (Isaiah 41:4). This is fundamentally different from gods who are bound by the laws and orders of nature, who are born and give birth to every living creature, and who can be defeated and expelled (Gelander 2009, 86). According to the beliefs of biblical man the power of God transcends every phenomenon of nature, and thus, it is crucial that he knows God’s will rather than be familiar with the order of nature itself. The idea of a Greek *kosmos*, i.e., an entirety of all things, which is complete in itself, is foreign to biblical thought. Biblical thought succeeded in overpowering the tendency of Antiquity to endow nature with mysterious power; nature is not an object of worship (Heschel 1976). Biblical man recognizes the existence of a natural order upon which he can rely; however, this order is embedded in nature by the will of God and he is eternally dependent on it.

The biblical way of thinking has from the beginning separated material being and its orders from the supreme, abstract and timeless entity, even if the latter resides in material reality (Barzel 2004, 9). In other words, the innovation of biblical faith is this separation of God from nature. This was, in fact, a complete revolution in the religious world of the ancient Near East, where, for example, the gods of Babylon are subordinate to nature and to fate (Muffs 2006, 28–43). The biblical process entails a movement from the magical, the impersonal, and the mechanical, towards a broader personality perception. Nature and its immanent laws are no longer the supreme concern. Nature is intended for use and pleasure; it is no longer an objective in and of itself, but it is also not a burden or an obstacle on the path to the highest perfection. In paganism, the primeval reality is an impersonal fate. In the Bible, God’s personification is so powerful that it appears to rule nature and, thus, nature transforms from primordial reality into a product of divine will. In biblical cosmology, an omnipotent infinite God creates things *ex nihilo*. God reveals himself to Israel as a god who rules nature and works wonders. The Bible does not tell us about God’s life and history;[[1]](#footnote-1) he is not ruled by fate (Kaufmann 1971, 245). Rather, the world of nature and its phenomena are made by his will.

The clearest manifestation of God as an entity wholly separate from nature is in the story of creation, in Genesis. In this story, God clearly existed before the world, and He created man and the entire world according to His will. The act of creating the universe seems an absolute miracle, a magnificent manifestation of God’s rule over the world. God is the master of creation and not its subordinate.

The stages of creation begin with the expression “and God said” (Genesis 1:3). Creation is accomplished through God’s speech: “The world was created with ten utterances” (*M. Avot* 5:1), as also described by Augustine: “But how do you make them? The way, God, in which you made heaven and earth … you spoke and they were made, and by your word you made them” (Augustine 1991, 11: v (7)). According to Greek thought, the world was not created by an external force. Gods did not create the world, but rather were created themselves during its evolution, and they are also subject to the rules governing the world. The Greeks did not view the creation of the world as creation *ex nihilo*, but as an assembling of the original given material.[[2]](#footnote-2) The gods of Olympus, the epitome of nature and its power, are beings born and giving birth, eternally creating and destroying. Since these gods are a model of the world itself, their constant rebirth is an expression of the world’s perpetual regeneration (Zielinski 1975, 28–103). Gods do not have the power to change the laws of the universe, since they themselves are subject to these laws.[[3]](#footnote-3) These limitations of the Greek gods’ powers are expressed in the ideas of necessity (*ananke*) and destiny (*moira*),[[4]](#footnote-4) both of which supersede the gods themselves (Finkelberg 1990, 51–59).

The debate over the question of God’s independence and separation from nature extends throughout the written history, as reflected in the question of whether the universe had a beginning, and if so, how did it begin. There are two schools of thought regarding this question; the first, which includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, claims that the universe was created *ex nihilo* and that humankind emerged thereafter. The *ex nihilo* story of creation is based upon the idea of God’s separation from nature. “However, no physical entity existed before heaven and earth … Unless it was created by you, it could not exist” (Augustine 1991, : 11 vi (8)). The second is reflected in Aristotle and Plato’s perceptions of God, according to which God is the designer and the architect of the universe, but not its creator. Matter is understood to be eternal, not created. “… and its Constructor good, it is plain that he fixed his gaze on the Eternal … He … took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder” (Plato 1925, 29–30). “Therefore, because of this reasoning, He fashioned it to be One single Whole … He wrought it into a round, in the shape of a sphere” (Plato 1925, ll. 33a). “For whereas the pattern is existent through all eternity, the copy [=Heaven], on the other hand, is through all time” (Plato 1925: ll. 38b-c). In the ancient polytheist Greek religion then,[[5]](#footnote-5) nature, gods, and man belong to a single system, governed by the same laws, as described by Heraclitus: “<The ordered?> world, the same for all, no god or man-made, but it always was, is, and will be, an ever living fire, being kindled in measures and being put out in measures” (Heraclitus 1987, 30).[[6]](#footnote-6) Notwithstanding this fundamental cultural difference, Roman and Hellenistic philosophers searched cosmologies of other cultures for that which is common to all men, as reflected in their myths, legends, and folklore. Greek philosophers sought the basic points of agreement between Moses and Plato (Dihle 1982, 5). Philo of Alexandria, for example, tried to prove that Moses and Plato teach the same “truth.” Philo argues in his essay “On the Creation” that the world comes into being; God creates out of goodness, as a super-architect, and imposes order onto shapeless material. “For the substance was of itself destitute of arrangement, of quality, of animation, of distinctive character, and full of all disorder and confusion” (Philo 1971, 5). “For before the world time had no existence, but was created simultaneously with it” (Philo 1971, 6). In “The life of Moses,” however, Philo describes creation as a unique miracle, “looking at the things which are really great and deserving of serious attention, namely, the creation of heaven … animals and plants… ever-flowing rivers and winter mountain torrents…and an infinite number of other beautiful objects” (Philo 1971, 227). The Roman philosopher Lucretius rejects the idea of creation *ex nihilo* unique to the Bible: “Therefore, when we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing” (Lucretius 1924, 150–154); “nothing can be brought to being out of nothing, inasmuch as it needs a seed for things, from which each may be produced” (Lucretius 1924, 205–207).

In the second half of the second century, the Greek philosopher Galen first pointed out the difference between the biblical and the Greek cultures, arguing that the basic distinction between these two cultures is a result of different cosmologies. Galen argued that the principle of God’s “free will” could only develop in biblical cosmology, where God’s will can impose order on chaotic material (Dihle 1982). God’s will[[7]](#footnote-7) fashions a different future, one where he has the ability to create, to change, to renew, to transform, to not repeat, and a chance to improve. Galen[[8]](#footnote-8) adds that the lack of free will in the classical Greek culture is also a result of its cosmology (Dihle 1982, 1). Greek theology and cosmology are based on the premise that everything which happens in the universe follows the logic given to man, in order for him to be able to understand his place in the world and to act accordingly. In this eternal deterministic world, free will does not exist. The world is ruled by fate and necessity. Free will is a product of the Bible. “Creation results from the power and the pleasure or will of Yahveh, and from nothing else” (Dihle 1982, 4). The Bible, which assumes *ex nihilo* creation, also assumes the existence of free will. “There is no boundary to his will and his rule… Not the abstraction but the utter supremacy of god’s will – this is the basic idea of the fate of the Israeli unity” (Kaufmann 1971, 244). God creates the world out of free will.

In the biblical story of creation, God is presented as transcending the laws of nature; he is omnipotent and thus has no need, for example, of celestial bodies to light up the world. The act of creation is described not only as an act of God’s free will, but also as an absolute miracle. Miracles interrupt the orderly acts of creation as proof of God’s free will. Thus, God halts the movement of celestial bodies in order to glorify Israel’s victory over the Amorites: “… and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon” (Joshua 10:12), or in order to give a sign to king Hezekiah: “Behold, I will bring again the shadow of the degrees … in the sun dial … ten degrees backward” (Isaiah 38:8). God also has the power to set boundaries for the sea: “… have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it” (Jeremiah 5:22), “When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment” (Proverbs 8:29). This separation is also evident from nature’s behavior towards God: “The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back. The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs … at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob” (Psalms 114:3–7), and from God’s attitude towards the nature he created:

13 Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. 14 Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.

15 Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers.

16 The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun (Psalms 74:13–16).

**Man’s separation from nature**

The relationship between God and man in the Bible is constructed as stable and sealed through law and oath (Muffs 2006, 34–43). This all-encompassing relationship is personal and includes a sealed contract with every individual – a far reaching anthropomorphism.

Man’s separation from nature is a consequence of God’s separation from nature. According to the interpretive approach we have adopted, God is a projection of human desires. According to the Bible, God and man are similar: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Man is thus obliged to imitate the qualities unique to God. Man is not God, although he aspires to adopt his attributes. The biblical man, similar to the biblical God, is endowed with free will; a free will which exists in the context of production, creation, and the ability to influence the future (Fromm 1975, 62–63). Free will develops when a benevolent entity exists and watches over human actions (Schechter 2007, 7).

Similar to God, man is separate from nature. He is superior in the hierarchy of all creatures, and participates in creating natural reality, “Israeli faith transferred the worldwide godly drama from the domain of nature and its powers to the domain of the human will. God’s will rules all things, but with one ‘reduction:’ man’s will, who was given free choice” (Kaufmann 1971, 472). Paganism, in contrast, perceived existence in its entirety as a material reality of which man is but a part; a reality which is certain, albeit unachievable. The innovation of the Bible is in determining man’s ability to participate in the creation of natural reality; to determine conditions and givens, as well as to intervene in the course of nature. The Bible commands man to interfere with processes, to initiate changes, and to be responsible for them. Nature becomes the target, the object of human will. Man, who fashions his own world similar to God, similarly needs free will.

In contrast with biblical monotheism, the great rhythm of nature in Egypt and Mesopotamia rules over man and nurtures him. The polytheist does not control the forces of nature, yet is completely dependent upon them. He is caught in the interactions of superior forces, which he must integrate into his life. The doctrine of a single, unconditional, transcendent god rejects ancient values and proclaims new ones in which the Hebrews sacrifice their harmonious co-existence with nature. The polytheist lives in a tolerant world, a world in which an emphasis is put on order, harmony, and union. The realms of society, nature, and gods are intertwined. Polytheistic religions thus tend to be *status quo* religions. In the Bible, however, there is a tension between God and creation (Wright 1978, 39).

Western culture, rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, sanctifies the belief that the world was created for the benefit of mankind. Man’s separation from nature is referred to as ‘Jewish egotism’ by Feuerbach. He argues that the theory of creation adopted by Christianity and rooted in the Bible, has as its basic premise egotism (Feuerbach 1957, 34–35). Only where man separates himself from nature is there room to wonder about the origin of the universe. According to Feuerbach, the separation entails the diminishment of nature to an object of man’s will. The Hebrews, he claims, combined faith, control over nature and gorging, “At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God” (Exodus 16:12).

Although the Israeli credo holds the concept of revelation rooted in a distant source, it leaves man with a choice and an obligation to complete the acts of Genesis. In the story of creation, man receives permission to conquer and rule[[9]](#footnote-15):“… and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28), and in Psalms “…Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field” (Psalms 8:6–7) Men are different from other creatures, and, like God, are envisioned as a being external to nature, imposing their own will and rules upon it (Lurie 2007, 45).

The separation of man from nature is not unique to the story of creation, but is interwoven throughout the bible. Thus, in the story of Cain and Abel: “If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him” (Genesis 4:7). This verse suggests that the desire for evil exists in man’s nature ‒ “unto thee shall be his desire” ‒ however, man is given a free choice, the ability to overcome his nature – “thou shalt rule over him.” The ability to overcome natural urges, moreover, signifies man’s separation from nature. Cain exerts his free will and chooses wrongdoing. In the biblical context, Cain cannot claim, like the Homeric heroes, that since he is controlled by external forces, he cannot be held accountable for his actions. Although in the conclusion of the story of Cain and Abel we find the notion of “damned for all times,” the story in fact reaffirms the precedence of agriculture.[[10]](#footnote-16) Although God accepts Abel’s sacrifice, Abel is murdered and Cain is the one who survives. This signifies that God has, in fact, accepted the idea of man’s intervention in the course of nature. It is evident in the biblical story that history is shaped by Cain, by the man who interferes with nature and shapes it to fulfill his needs. Tubal, one of Cain’s descendants, is the father of technological civilization, “an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron” (Genesis 4:22).

Man’s intervention in nature is found also in the story of Eden: The first man was brought to Eden in order to make a life for himself, a life in which he will have to work the land and to transform it beyond its raw initial conditions of creation: “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

Just as the separation of God from nature was foreign to Greek philosophy, so was the separation of man from nature. Man, according to the Greek view, is merely a small cog within the overall system. His position is inferior in a world which was not devised by a creator, a world in which even gods are limited in their abilities and are subject to rules. Since man is not the lord of creation, ancient Greeks feared transgressing the boundaries of human nature and diverging from their predestined path. Nature, gods and man are part of a single system, governed by the same laws (Finkelberg 1990, 57). This understanding finds expression in Homer, who compares men to leaves in the forest: “As is the race of leaves, even such is the race of men. Some leaves the wind sheds upon the ground” (Homer 1870: 146–147). Similarly, Aristotle, who views man as a rational being, and as such, a marvel of nature, still understands man as part of it. Human behavior imitates nature; man learns from nature: “These occurrences are all natural … The arts either, on the basis of Nature, carry things further than Nature can, or they imitate Nature” (Aristotle 1929–1934, II:viii ). Lucretius also does not see the world as created intentionally for the benefit of man. On the contrary, man’s development is his adaptation to the environment. “The nature of the world is by no means made by divine grace for us” (Lucretius 1924, 180).

Man’s free will and separation from nature as expressed in the Bible are also manifested by the act of praying. Prayer allows man to thank God for past munificence and make requests for the future (Mack 2001).[[11]](#footnote-17) At the heart of the prayer lies the awareness of the existential reciprocal bond between man and God. This is the fundamental significance of man as a creation in His image and His likeness. Prayer contains an appeal for future changes, which are possible when there is no perception of fate. That is to say, the future is mutable.[[12]](#footnote-18) The heroes of the Bible pray for themselves and for others. Usually, prayers are offered during a state of distress, a request for God to intervene and act: “and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched” (Numbers 11:2). Only a minority of prayers are prayers of thanks. The personal prayers found in the biblical literature are primal, direct, and urgent cries in an effort to please God. In this kind of prayer, man, of his own free will, addresses the free will of God, who transcends the laws of nature. The biblical prayer, similar to worshiping with sacrifices, serves God in his creation. Through the worship of God, man achieves his own freedom (Schweid 2009, 30–33). As a reward for his worship, man will gain success similar to God’s success; control over creation. Biblical freedom is associated with man’s ability to claim for himself from the surrounding nature and its creatures. From the biblical perspective, man was created to fulfill a designated mission assigned to him by God – to complete creation and himself in it. Thus, as separate from nature and as created in God’s image, man aspires to be successful in his mission, one which has no boundaries.

According to the Greek view, prayer does not have the power to change the laws of nature or to affect the intentions of gods. Gods can change processes and interfere with the world. However, they too are subject to the laws governing the universe (Dihle 1982). This contrasts with biblical prayer, the purpose of which is to complete the unfinished creation. Prayer is based on speech and speech allows man to be the master of creation. Even though man does not change the nature of creatures, by virtue of his speech he defines their essence and can use them to achieve bad or good goals, as he wishes.

The prayer “Kriat Shema,” the heart of Jewish prayer, is comprised of three sections from the Torah. In the second section, along with the obligation to obey the commandments, there is mention of the reward promised to man and to the society who obey the commandments, as well as the expected punishment should they fail. This is to say, success in life is promised to those who fulfill the commandments and those who do not abide by them are expected to fail. Nature, separate from man, will provide for him by virtue of God’s commandment:

And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments … That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil … thou mayest eat and be full … and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them … that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit (Deuteronomy 11:13–17).

**Hierarchical attitudes towards nature in the West**

Westerners’ treatment of animals is one expression of the fact that Western man sees himself as separate from nature and superior to other creatures. Western anthropocentrism is rooted in the Biblical and Hellenistic traditions. The attitudes these sources inspired, in turn, found an even more extreme expression in the writings of Christian theologians and scholars from the middle ages and the early Renaissance, thereby becoming incorporated into the cultural infrastructure of Western thought (Serpell 2007, 15–16).

The Old Testament exhibits a clear and prominent hierarchy in many aspects of creation. At the top of the ladder, the one and only God reigns supreme; this is the Old Testament God, who is separate and superior to all other gods and who demands exclusivity: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3); “thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (Exodus 20:5). And since the world is full of objects that one might worship (Kasher 2004, 33), he even orders: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4).

Second in the hierarchical ladder is man, the crown of creation: “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels… thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea” (Psalms 8:5–8); “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High” (Psalms 82:6). The Western tradition, which is based largely on Biblical cosmology, sees man as the most perfect of beings, superior to all other creatures. An additional hierarchy also exists among people, to differentiate those who have been chosen from among all other nations.

The idea of the chosen people makes frequent appearances in the text of Old Testament: “I give waters in the wilderness… to give drink to my people, my chosen” (Isaiah 43:20); “the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6); “for the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people” (1 Samuel 12:22); “we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalms 100:3). The People of Israel are described in the Old Testament as a chosen nation, separate from other nations and essentially unique. As a result, the narrative of the “chosen people” has become a dominant narrative among Jewish communities throughout the ages (Gertz 1995, 67). For example, Yehuda Halevi’s celebrated work *The Kuzari* draws extensively on this narrative. Driven by the desire to bolster the faith in the heart of every member of his nation, Halevi depicts the Jewish people as unique among the nations by virtue of being chosen, of being sanctified by the Lord. He argues his point thus: “If we were required to keep the Torah because God created us, then all peoples would be equally obligated… But the Torah was given to us because God brought us out of Egypt and remained attached to us, since we are the chosen of humanity” (Halevi 2017, 45). In his eyes, the people of Israel carry the “seed of chosenness” that distinguishes them from among all other peoples.

The idea of being “chosen” also appears in the Old Testament as a differentiating factor between tribes and groups. For instance, God distinguishes the tribe of Levi from among the twelve tribes of Israel: “And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel” (Numbers 3:12). Out of the chosen tribe of Levi, God picks the *cohens*, his priests: “Take the sum of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, after their families, by the house of their fathers” (Numbers 4:2). Aharon the priest, forefather to all the priests of Israel, is the son of Amram son of Kohath, and Kohath is the second son of Levi son of Jacob, the originator of the tribe of Levi: “And to the office of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest pertaineth the oil for the light” (Numbers 4:16). Their status as a chosen faction confers upon them the responsibility “to do the work in the tabernacle of the congregation. This shall be the service of the sons of Kohath” (Numbers 4:3–4).

The concept of a hierarchical order among people also appears in the Hellenistic tradition, even though this culture does not see man as separate from nature. Aristotle’s hierarchical attitude towards animals is also reflected in his view of slavery. According to Aristotelian essentialism, nature creates species in order to make them suitable to fulfilling specific functions, and it is based on this viewpoint that Aristotle establishes a hierarchy among animals, men and women, masters and slaves. As he argues: “For domestic animals are by nature better than wild ones, and it is better for all of them to be ruled by human beings, since this will secure their safety. Moreover, the relation of male to female is that of the natural superior to the natural inferior, and that of ruler to ruled. But, in fact, the same holds true of all human beings… For he who can belong to someone else… is a natural slave” (Aristotle 1998, 8–9).

Plato, on the other hand, objects to the ownership of Greek slaves in his republic. Although he remarks that “Barbarians” may be bought as slaves, for they are slaves by nature, the same cannot be tolerated for Greeks of “inferior” mental capacities. This because “there is another class of servants, who are intellectually hardly on the level of companionship; still they have plenty of bodily strength for labor, which accordingly they sell, and are called, if I do not mistake, hirelings, hire being the name which is given to the price of their labor… Then hirelings will help to make up our population” (Plato 2004, 33).

Slavery, just like the subordination of women to male dominion, was a norm in ancient Greece. Aristotle believed it permissible to enslave human beings who have been found lacking in reason by the same logic as it is permissible to enslave animals. In the ancient world, on the other hand, in Egypt, in the Fertile Crescent and in Assyria, the killing of animals for food outside of ritual sacrifice was considered a crime. After the ritual slaughter, the priests would sometimes whisper apologies to the animal or punish the knife with which it had been killed. In many instances, the animal intended for the sacrifice would be given special care and food prior to the ritual to compensate for its loss of life (Serpell 2007, 29–30). According to Singer (1998, 3–9), Fisher (1979, 190–192), and others, the subordination of women to men’s authority was derived from the hierarchical view of animals and the process of their domestication. Fischer believes that the vertical-hierarchical structure, which places the human master above the animal enslaved to his or her needs, has amplified the cruelty of which human beings are capable and prepared the ground for human slavery (Fisher 1979, 197).

Among historians and environmentalists, there are those who believe that the fateful passage in the Book of Genesis in which God grants man control over animals condemned Western civilization to a path of destruction that has lasted two thousand years (Patterson 2002, 16). However, while the Old Testament sanctifies the superiority of man over animals in the name of God, it also decrees laws prohibiting the physical or mental abuse of animals, which apply certain restrictions to this principle.[[13]](#footnote-19) The Greco-Roman tradition, which also had a significant influence on Western culture, established a barrier that separated human beings from animals. Nevertheless, despite the exploitation of animals in the Greco-Roman world, the tradition also identified them with divinities, and sometimes the Gods would be depicted in animal form – unlike the monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition (Gersht 2007, 79–98).

In the New Testament, there is almost no mention of the relations between human beings and other forms of life. Nevertheless, we must take into account the overwhelming influence of the Old Testament in shaping the Christian viewpoint regarding the hierarchy among living creatures. In fact, Christianity absorbed both the Biblical and the Greek views that asserted the dominance of man over the rest of creation, but left out the restraints dictated by Hebrew law. It would seem then that the hierarchical attitudes of mastership over animals, although based on Old Testament and Hellenistic sources, reach their apotheosis in Christianity.

According to Saint Augustine, animals are devoid of a rational soul and therefore one need not pay any attention to their suffering. Augustine proclaims that the sixth commandment, “thou shalt not kill,” does not apply to creatures devoid of reason; they do not belong to the community of rational beings and therefore their lives and deaths are only significant in as far as they are useful to us. In his words: “When we read ‘You shall not kill’ we assume that this does not refer to bushes, which have no feelings nor to irrational creatures, flying, swimming, or walking… It is by a just arrangement of the Creator that their life and death is subordinated to our needs” (Augustine 2003, 31–32).

Christian sermons often presented animals, and especially dogs, as instruments of divine punishment or messengers of Satan. The medieval Christian doctrine viewed animals with contempt, because they have no soul. This view, based explicitly on Scripture, prevailed until the beginning of the modern era in Christian Europe. In fact, humanity in the West was defined in terms of the absence of animal qualities or animal behavior (Salisbury 1994, 167). Animals were considered impulsive and subject by irrational instincts; conversely, the perfect Christian was expected to control himself by relying on reason and experience. Just as an animal’s natural tendency is to fulfill its sexual desire as soon as it arises, so a Christian must abstain from sexual activity, and the same principle applies to eating and more. Man, supreme in the hierarchy of creation, has free will and therefore, so preaches the Christian tradition, he can and must successfully overcome himself and his nature.

**Epilogue**

The culture of the Western-Christian world is founded on two traditions: the Biblical tradition and the Greek tradition. The two central masterpieces of Western culture, the Bible and the poetry of Homer, became the foundations of subsequent religious and cultural works (Knohl 2008, 15). Ancient Christianity is the direct product of its ancestor, Judaism. The Hellenistic influence on Christianity came primarily via Jewish Greek-speaking communities, which flourished in the diaspora and in Israel itself. And indeed, Hellenistic Judaism had the most influence upon the development of the Western Church (Vallee 1999). As already discussed, acceptance of the world as it is and of fate is a tenet of Greek thought. The biblical man, on the other hand, is endowed with free will, which compels him to reject the status quo and to improve upon creation, with a will that drives him to succeed and establish his dominion over nature. The biblical view of creation sanctifies constant action. Man is required to create his own world every day from the start; he is given permission to do so since he is a partner in creation. Biblical religion shapes God’s image as separate from the world he created, free from the laws of nature, and as such, and in contrast with Greek philosophy, it increases God’s freedom and strengthens the power of man’s free choice.

In the Christian world, which is based on these two traditions, there is a constant debate over the existence of free will.[[14]](#footnote-20) In Western discourse, which has evolved out of the Greek and the Biblical points of view and revolves around the question of similarity and difference between them, there was a shift from a narrative discourse to a rationalist one; “a shift from mythos to logos” (Lurie 2007, 64). However, biblical cosmology remains deeply rooted in the cultural context of the West. Western culture developed based on Biblical cosmology, in which men are likened to God, separate from nature, and impose their will on other creatures. This separation from nature is related to man’s understanding of the earth, its flora and fauna, and of relationships between social groups. Western men’s approach toward other creatures of nature is tyrannical; Freud refers to the supremacy over other living creatures which the Western man has claimed for himself as “man’s megalomania” (as cited in Patterson 2002, 17). A culture founded upon the assumption that there exists a hierarchy, containing both primitive inferiors and more superior individuals, is an inequitable culture in every sense. Indeed, some historians and environmentalists believe that it was the fateful biblical text where God grants man dominion over all creatures and all nature in the book of Genesis, which set Western civilization on its two millennia-long path of destruction (Patterson 2002, 29).

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1. “The idea of God in Israeli faith is beyond mythic; meaning, it has no story about God’s coming into being, and it lacks the elements of pagan mythology, for example, the birth of a god out of clay or from another god, his ancestry, changes in rulers, or pagan genealogy. It is not only Yahveh, but also his surroundings, that are not mythological … Yahveh demands to be unique” (Ohana and Wistrich 1996:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The original meaning of the Greek world *kosmos* is order, accord, and harmony. The Greeks viewed the cosmos as an orderly and beautiful entity (Rodan 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the Mesopotamian world, even though the gods number in the thousands, nature is not chaotic. It has a dependable rhythm and order. The gods have arranged the universe into a cosmic kingdom where each of its powers has its own dedicated role (Wright 1968, 18–19). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Moira*, the ancient idea of predestination, or fate, evolved eventually in Greek philosophy into immutable laws of nature, which can only be comprehended, not changed. Thus, it accordingly follows that chaos is a starting point of Greek mythology and cosmos is a starting point of Greek philosophy. Chaos is controlled by the gods, while cosmos is controlled by man, who perceives himself and his world rationally (Ohana and Wistrich 1996, 17). In ancient times destiny was used as a decision-making tool. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Greek polytheism, as well as polytheism in Egypt and Mesopotamia, each had a mythology. The God of Israel, as already noted, has no mythology of his origins. The original background for his revelation is historical, not natural. The sons of Israel in the Bible recall their past in terms of God’s acts throughout history and not in nature (Wright 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The cosmos, according to Heraclitus, is an eternal fire. The fire, which consumes its fodder, is a symbol of movement, contrast, and war. Shkolnikov and Weinryb (1998, 21–35) claim that Heraclitus most certainly did not have a theory of elements. Gottlieb (2001) believes that Heraclitus had a theory of the cyclicality of the universe and thought that all things, as part of a complete cycle, turn into fire in repeating series of cosmic flares. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although the biblical God is omnipotent and all-controlling, the fact that in the story of Eden he does not prevent access to the tree of knowledge, for example, may reveal the principle of free choice which guides God’s decisions. On the other hand, the fact that God denies access to the tree of life at the same time may show that if he had wanted to, he would have prevented access to the tree of knowledge (Gelander 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. "The Jews, he says ... (Galen) He can transform a lump of earth into a horse or a bird or whatever he pleases. Creation depends solely and entirely on the will of the creator...The Greek creator... brings to reality only what reason evinces as being possible" (Dihle 1982, 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One of the four great errors in the interpretation of reality described by Nietzsche (1977), is that man has incorrectly understood his position in relationship to beasts and to nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
10. Barzel believes the story of Cain and Abel represents the biblical preference for working the land: man’s intervention in the course of nature means man’s participation in the creation of entities. Moreover, the primary interest of the Torah is to guide the farmer in his actions. The description of Cain as the creator of reality and as a leader of historical processes testifies to God’s intentions (Barzel 2004, 34–38). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
11. Prayer is the duty of the religious Jew. Many of the prayers in Judaism are based on the Bible (Mack 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
12. The word *tfila* (‘prayer’) in Hebrew is derived from the root *p.l.l.*, meaning to hope and look forward to. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
13. The Jewish tradition’s relative compassion towards animals stems from the Biblical passages prohibiting animal work on the Sabbath and requiring grazing fields to be allotted to beasts of burden, among others. “He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck… they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations” (Isaiah 66:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
14. Christian philosophers, who wanted to formulate a Christian worldview based on the Bible, as well as on concepts from Greek thought, tried to arrange the ideas of desire, will, and choice alongside wisdom, which was central to the Greek philosophy as a distinctly human activity. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas proposed a perspective from which the gaps between the natural and the rational and between the material and the spiritual will be unseen, yet still distinct. He proposed that they be viewed as an array of levels, whereby each level relies upon and incorporates, but also broadens and deepens the preceding one. Aquinas believes man to be created in the image of God and bound to complete the resemblance he carries. The foundation of desire and free will is natural desire, which can only be satisfied by God. The desire for goodness distinguishes the natural will from other natural desires (Wohlman 2005, 49–52). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)