

***A Study of Oxen: Stewardship, Training, and Theology***



By Emma Cross

Introduction

My senior capstone project is a compilation of research, analysis, and application of science, historical traditions, and biblical worldview. There are three parts of my project: first, the science behind growing and feeding an ox. Second, growing in skills of applying that knowledge properly to training a team; and third, biblical and allegorical value of oxen. The purpose of this project is to research and teach some ways to best steward your cattle, and reflect the themes found in Genesis 2:15. Also, this project includes key knowledge, skills, and methods of training an effective team of oxen. Lastly, there are many theological topics that can be taught through allegories of working oxen and the yoke, and this project also elaborates on those.

Building a strong and dependable ox team is a demanding process that benefits from scientific understanding, disciplined training, and wise stewardship. Every effective team has been trained with a careful balance of nutrition, conditioning, rest, and patience. Throughout history, oxen have served as dependable working animals because of their endurance, strength, and effectiveness in agriculture. It is important to understand how cattle grow, think, respond to stress, and process training. At the same time as these things, it is also essential that the teamster develops a relationship with the team to build trust, respect, and effectiveness.

The first section of this project examines the scientific and nutritional aspects that are involved in raising a healthy oxen team. It is helpful for the teamster to have these understandings including, digestion, muscle growth, conditioning, recovery, and proper feeding. The second section focuses on the application of this knowledge when a teamster is seeking to create a training plan that incorporates practical methods. Effective ox training involves understanding the mental behavior of cattle, establishing leadership, and maintaining consistency. Much of this information is drawn from the expertise of Dr. Drew Conroy, a University of New Hampshire professor and respected ox teamster. The final section illustrates allegories of oxen and yokes that are found in Scripture. These biblical images point to the commitment to discipleship and relationship to Christ. Together, these three sections demonstrate that the process of raising and training an ox team reflects far more than physical labor, and reveals how patience, discipline, and wisdom work together to guide towards a greater purpose.

## Scientific and Nutritional Principles

## of Raising an Ox Team

Before an oxen team is ever hitched up to a load, the strength of the team is carefully built through a balance of nutrition, conditioning, and rest. Strength in an ox is not accidental; it requires a caring attention to detail, patience, and wise stewardship. Seeing an ox team performing farm work seems simple, but in reality, there is a required balance of nourishment and discipline, as is essential for growth in any living being. The following information dives deeper into this topic, and is mostly drawn from a conversational interview that was conducted with University of New Hampshire (UNH) professor and master cattle handler, Dr. Drew Conroy. Unlike many traditional oxen teamsters, Dr. Conroy combines hands-on agricultural experience with academic research, as he earned a PhD based on work conducted in Tanzania, working alongside local farms and cultivators there. His unique background brings together practical farming, global agricultural systems, and education. In addition to his academic work, he has contributed to historical films such as *The Oregon Trail* and *The Crucible*, further demonstrating his engagement with traditional practices.

There are a vast amount of details that are discovered when one is learning how to raise the most efficient oxen team. Also, there are many skills and much knowledge that are gained over years of experience. Dr. Drew Conroy highlighted the important factors roughly categorized into three main topics: nutritional foundations, exercise and conditioning, and adequate management practices of recovery. Proper nutrition, repeated physical stress, and adequate rest are all key components in developing a strong and healthy pair of oxen. Each of these topics contains both broad and specific details, and knowledge of these greatly assists a teamster in raising their cattle to be the most effective working animals that they can be.

### **Nutritional Foundations of Oxen Development**

The first key component of raising a strong and effective team of oxen is providing high-quality nutrition through a better understanding of their digestive system and the nutrients and care the cattle require. Cattle are ruminants, meaning they have a four-compartment stomach that allows them to ferment and digest tough and fibrous plants. This explains why cattle chew cud, as it travels through each compartment of the stomach, it is necessary for rumination to occur through rechewing the food. The saliva of the cattle further breaks down the food each time, and microbial fermentation occurs, which is necessary to break down cellulose in plants and provides the necessary nutrients to the animal. Overall, the food travels through four compartments of the stomach: the reticulum, rumen, omasum, and abomasum.

First is the reticulum, which is occasionally referred to as the honeycomb chamber, and serves the purpose of catching large food materials. The second compartment is the rumen, which contains a large fermentation vat that offers a place for food to be sorted, agitated, and fermented by millions of microbes. These microbes “attach themselves to feed particles and digest the feed, producing by-products in the form of volatile fatty acids” (Chauncey 6). These acids are absorbed and are used as energy for the animal. The third compartment is the omasum, which contains layers of tissue that minerals from the feed and water are trapped within and are able to be absorbed. The abomasum is the fourth compartment in the stomach and is considered to be the true stomach that is resembled in most other mammals. Within this compartment, gastric enzymes and digestive acids are produced, which break down starches, proteins, and sugars. Cattle also have a small intestine, which absorbs all nutrients except water, and the large intestine absorbs the water. These compartments of the stomach require five major nutrients to sufficiently operate and fuel the remnant animal. These are: energy, protein, vitamins, minerals, and most importantly, water.

In order for a steer or ox to have healthy muscles and organs, there is a balance of nutrition necessary, which varies and depends heavily on age, but also other factors such as the animal's breed, size, and body condition. To explain these variants, estimated explanations for calves, a growing steer, and then for mature cattle (three years old) will be used in the following paragraphs. When the calf is first born, it is essential that the first nutrients that enter its body are the colostrum

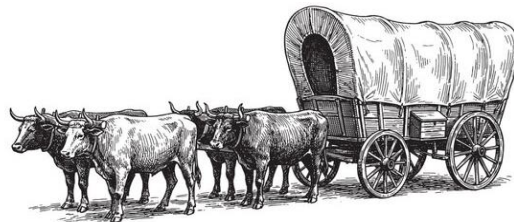
from the cow (mother of the calf). This first milk contains essential antibodies for the calf, and “these antibodies can be passed on to the calf in a form of passive immunity, which will help the calf survive. The antibodies can help the calf defend itself against diseases in the area” (Chauncey 9). This is only effective for the first few hours of life, so the farmer must take action to ensure the calf has the necessary sources of immunity. Once separated from the mother cow, the calf requires high-quality milk replacer for approximately eight weeks until weaning begins. Once the calf is seen consistently eating the calf starter grain and high-quality hay, the weaning is complete.

The next phase of life for the cattle is full of fiber and protein, and sufficient levels of these things are essential for healthy growth. These growing steers require hay and some grain, and “if the hay or pasture doesn’t have a level of protein that is at least around 12-14%, you may have to feed a protein supplement in small amounts.... grains can be fed at around 4lbs per day and gradually increased (.5 to 1lb every other day) until you reach 40-45% (maximum) of the diet,” (Chauncey 10). There are many charts and data tables that specify the necessary proteins and other nutrients for different-aged and sized animals as they progress through this growing time in their life.

However, when a steer reaches three years of age, there is a more consistent routine of feeding, with changes being made based on the appearance of the body condition of the cattle. Dr. Conroy emphasized his insight that mature cattle do not really have a need for grain, since the hay or pasture they consume has the nutrients that are necessary for these animals' mature bodies. Moreover, “older animals need less protein, less energy, more fiber, and consumption of a lower percentage of their body weight each day (around 2%)” (Chauncey 10). Dr. Conroy roughly put it this way: think of the diet difference between a sixteen-year-old teenage boy and a fifty-year-old man: even though the fifty-year-old man is larger than the young boy, if he ate the same diet as the teenager, he would quickly become more obese. This is because the fifty-year-old man does not require the same nutrients as the growing boy anymore, and the same goes for cattle. A mature and fully grown steer does not need the same amount of nutrients as the yearling growing calf. Although these animals are big and look like they need lots of food to keep living, they do not!

This is why mature cattle do not require the amount of protein that is found in grain, and can get sufficient amounts of it in hay and pasture.

While speaking on the necessary amounts of feed and nutrition for cattle, there is also the topic of managing grazing. Dr. Conroy emphasized again that this depends on age, and suggested that for calves, it is absolutely not necessary to limit the time the cattle have grazing pasture that is either dead or bright green. For a mature steer, a three-year-old, there are suggestions of limiting time in pasture to six or eight hours when the grass is healthy and green. When the grass is not lush, there is no need to consider any implementation of leaving the cattle to graze freely.



*Historical connection!*

This briefly connects to a historical topic that Dr. Conroy is familiar with, and that is: the Oregon Trail. Dr. Conroy explained that people who took oxen with them on this journey found them favorable for one main reason: **Nutrition**. Horses require high-quality feed, adequate rest, and tend to be more picky when it comes to basic care. However, cattle can be nourished by even the driest meadows in the west. Dr. Conroy explained the typical daily routine for oxen travelers: the cattle would walk with the wagon all day, then the cattle would graze for about six hours, lie down for a couple of hours, and then work all day. Compared to the horses, cattle could work a whole day without needing more feed or rest. Therefore, Dr. Conroy believes that cattle were more effective for this excursion as long as the driver did not push the animals, but allowed them to walk at a controlled, steady pace. As long as this was true, the cattle would just keep on going, unlike picky horses.

*Fun Fact:* Dr. Conroy and his own team were in a movie about the Oregon Trail!

This part of history links to the natural rhythm of feeding, recovery, and labor that aligns with the biological needs of the animal. Another important topic of nourishing a team of oxen is minerals, which is one of the five key nutrients. Dr. Conroy listed the three most important nutrients as follows: #1 Salt, #2 Calcium, #3 Phosphorus. Calcium and phosphorus are especially

important for growing calves as mineral intake is vital for both skeletal development and overall health. Additionally, *water* is a fundamental requirement that supports all metabolic processes, including digestion, circulation, and temperature regulation.

### **Exercise, Conditioning, and Muscle Development**

The next broad topic Dr. Conroy developed was that of repeated physical stress and consistent conditioning of oxen in order to develop a strong and effective working pair of oxen. Muscle development in oxen follows the same fundamental biological principles observed in other mammals, including humans. Recognizing this parallel will help in understanding the ways oxen respond to work. Muscle development occurs when these three physiological attributes coincide: stress, repair, and hypertrophy. In this instance, in the discussion of working oxen, stress is experienced by the muscles when the team is worked for a semi-extended period of time. When muscles experience this stress, the muscle fibers undergo strain during the work, and this creates microscopic tears, called microtrauma. Dr. Conroy expressed a need for easing into work for an ox team, since the animals need to acclimate to work in order to avoid injury and maximize performance. It is necessary to pay special attention to the neck area, which must develop resistance similar to a callous with the pressure of the yoke, since they have not experienced this kind of stress on their necks naturally.

The second attribute to muscle growth is repair, which is a process in which satellite cells repair the torn fibers, and is a process called satellite cell activation. After this process, the result is called hypertrophy, where the muscle fibers increase in size, mass, and thickness. To continue this process in growing the muscle of an ox, one must use progressive overload, which is when weight or intensity is regularly increased to continue forcing the muscle fibers to adapt. Each time the muscles experience hypertrophy, the muscles that are repaired are now thicker and stronger, being more capable of handling future stress.

### **Adequate Rest and Recovery**

To understand the topic of providing a team with adequate rest and recovery, it is helpful to consider the parallel of training a team to training a human athlete. This topic directly relates to

the process that was explained in the previous section about conditioning, specifically when it comes to understanding the way the animal responds to work. Consider this section to be more focused on caring for the animal itself, rather than just understanding what is going on within the animal's muscles. An extremely important detail to understand about cattle is the way they mentally respond to work, not solely physically. Dr. Conroy clearly described a parallel thought process to a training athlete and explained that you must imagine what runs through an athlete's mind when a workout becomes strenuous. A good and disciplined athlete will mentally feel the pain that their body is experiencing, but will choose to overcome that thought to gain the benefit of having a stronger body. Cattle are different when it comes to this, and when their minds think that their bodies are being overworked, they will give up and stop. This is the outcome of overworking an ox team, but it is important to understand that it is not the body of the animal that always needs rest; it is more essential that their mind gets rest. An ox's head will give up before their body since they do not have the same mental capacity as a dedicated athlete to push past that.

With that explained, understanding that building muscle in an ox is a process in which the animal itself must be considered, along with what they are experiencing. Success in growing a team's strength will not come without compassion for what the animal needs, and the details behind this process go deeper than the science that is occurring within the muscles themselves. Reading the team and being able to understand their mental limits is essential to training an effective team, since a team that is not comfortable or acclimated is useless at work.

Cattle also experience a feeling similar to lactic acid in humans, which causes soreness. This would only cause a problem and cause ineffectiveness in the next work session if the team is overworked. Dr. Conroy made another connection to the human experience in this, explaining that similar to when an unfit person jumps into an intense workout and overworks themselves, and then that person can barely walk out of the gym or lift their arms. The same idea is what may happen to an ox team, only if a teamster overworks an unacclimated team. This overexertion can lead to reduced performance in subsequent work sessions, therefore the teamster ought to learn to read

their team and better understand when both their mental and physical limits have been reached in a workout to avoid this.

### **Conclusion**

There is a variety of science behind growing muscle in an ox team, and traditional strategies and habits to increase success and productivity. The collective knowledge from the interview with Dr. Drew Conroy supports a clear scientific model for developing a strong and productive ox team. It combines repeated physical stress that simulates muscle adaptation, proper nutrition that provides the resources for growth and repair, and providing a team with adequate rest that allows for full recovery and strength to build. Together, these factors create a continuous cycle of improvement in strength, endurance, and overall productivity. This interview highlights the importance of a balanced and educated approach to raising and training oxen. Successfully developing a team is not based solely on feeding and labor, but on the integration of nutrition, physiology, and educated management practices. By tailoring feeding strategies to age and other varying factors, and understanding some of the biological processes behind muscle growth, a teamster can maximize both the health of the animals and their effectiveness as a working team.

### *Application of Knowledge in Training Regimen*

The second of the three main sections of this project will focus on applying scientific principles to the practical and traditional training of an ox team. There will be thoughts expanding

on previous topics that were discussed in the first section, such as allowing a team to acclimate to being worked and a healthy work-to-rest ratio. A successful ox team is not built simply by making animals pull heavier loads; true training requires understanding both the physical and mental limits of the team. While muscle growth, nutrition, and conditioning provide the foundation for strength, effective training depends even more on patience, consistency, recovery, and the relationship between teamster and oxen. Through applying the scientific principles discussed in the previous section, this portion of the project explores how knowledge becomes practice in the daily work of developing a productive and responsive ox team.

### **Understanding Cattle**

In order for someone to apply knowledge of how to grow the strength of an ox team, it is first and foremost necessary for that person to understand the minds of cattle and how they perceive work and humans. The first fundamental and key understanding to have is that cattle are herd animals, and in a herd, there is a dominance order that each animal has its place in. When someone wants to train large animals such as cattle, they must put themselves at the top of that list and establish themselves as the dominant one in the herd. Dr. Conroy explained, “as the teamster, you must establish dominance early so your animals will never realize their strength and power” (Conroy 79). Without this, the oxen will see no need to listen to the commands they have been taught and will most often test the teamster's patience by seeing how much they can get away with. This can be seen in a team through aggressiveness, running away, reluctance to pull, or inattentiveness. Therefore, it is crucial that the teamster demands the respect of the animals starting at a very young age.

A topic that was already discussed, but is important to reinforce when considering making a workout regimen for training a team, is knowing the animal's limits before you start. Understanding how cattle think is crucial to making a successful plan for training. When it comes to the circumstance that a team is experiencing soreness or a lack of desire to work, they have likely been overworked. According to Dr. Conroy, “it is in the head, not in the muscles.” As explained before, cattle have no desire to push past the mental limit of their bodies, and once their

minds feel the stress of the workout, they will give up even if their physical strength exceeds what is necessary to pull the load successfully. Although muscle recovery remains important, Dr. Conroy explained that mental fatigue is often the greater concern and challenge for the teamster to navigate. Key principles of this topic include: avoiding excessive heavy pulling sessions, not repeatedly pushing the team beyond its mental limit, and allowing adequate recovery between demanding workloads.

Heavy pulling is still necessary because oxen must learn how to handle significant loads, and the physical technique and response that the animal must have to be in a ready position for pulling a large load. However, these demanding sessions should be spread out from one another. Dr. Conroy referenced successful competitors, such as Brian Patten, who understood this part of cattle. This knowledge is what develops his strategic competitiveness throughout the fair season, as he never pushes his team to their limit for the majority of the season. While other teamsters continue to push their teams to pull very heavy loads starting at the beginning of the season, Mr. Patten will withdraw from the competition and settle for a lesser position in the competition when he recognizes that his team is nearing their limit. However, towards the end of the season, when his competitors' teams are mentally exhausted from a hard season of pulling, Mr. Patten will push his team to their limits and take first place. He is okay with pushing his team at this time of the season because Mr. Patten knows that his team will have the months of winter following the fair season to rest and recover. This is a great demonstration of a teamster applying the knowledge of the way cattle think and understanding the importance of considering this when planning a training regimen for oxen.

Dr. Conroy summarizes these ideas in this way: "When training a team, maintain control, strive toward perfection in every regard, and never let your team get the best of you" (Conroy 248). Teamsters must recognize the limits of their oxen and create a balanced workload that allows the teamster to establish dominance and leadership while also considering the mental process of cattle. Another helpful way of explaining the way cattle approach training is this: "The desired result of training steers is to have a team with spirit that works eagerly for you. Getting to that point requires

developing a specific plan that you will follow throughout the training. The plan need not be written or elaborate, but should follow a flow of events that you control. You should not react to the behavior of your cattle, but rather the animals should react to your training techniques” (Conroy 79). Applying these principles of the way cattle think and behave will be extraordinarily helpful when working to train a team, as it helps the teamster know how best to respond and prepare for a work session.

### **Framework of a Workout Plan**

When developing a workout plan, it is first necessary for the teamster to get to know their team and recognize their strengths and weaknesses. After this, one can begin making a general plan for working and training a team. In his book, *Oxen: A Teamster’s Guide*, Dr. Conroy gives six rules of training and a ten-step training schedule for teamsters to use as a basis for training, which can then be adapted to each individual team. In order to build a trustworthy, safe, and workable team, following these six rules is essential, and even failure to enforce one of these can produce an ineffective team. These six rules are: set goals, maintain control, be firm, be patient, be consistent, and work regularly. Also essential to creating a workable team are these ten steps that ought to be incorporated into a workout schedule for a team: Leading, handling, introducing the yoke, stopping and starting, turning, pulling a load, practicing often, avoiding leading, introducing challenges, and ending on a positive note.

(1) First, to further discuss the six rules of training proposed by Dr. Drew Conroy; Setting goals is an essential part of training a team, which explains why it is number one in this list. If a teamster attempts to train a team without an end goal in mind, each and every day, then the teamster will fail. There must be a set destination that the teamster is working towards, bringing their team to be able to do, otherwise it is very easy for the team to outsmart the teamster and make no progress at all in a workout. Having goals also helps the teamster not move too quickly in training, as “oxen can learn only a few commands at a time. Decide which commands you will teach your team first. When they master those commands, move on to the next set of commands,”

(Conroy 80). If a teamster jumps in and teaches too many commands or does not work to master one at a time, a team can become confused and therefore make no progress.

Maintaining control is essential, as a small young team will soon be multiple times bigger than the teamster. Starting with establishing control using leverage, such as a halter, is important, as that will be the foundation that can be returned to when the animal is larger. Maintaining control also applies to the teamster, and when the team is misbehaving or making a mistake, the teamster must maintain control of their frustration. “When things go wrong, be ready to blame yourself and not the animals. Teamsters who cannot control their teams usually bring the situation upon themselves,” (Conroy 81). This also goes hand in hand with the next rule, which is to be firm. A teamster cannot maintain control of their team if they do not stand firm with each command they give, until the team responds appropriately. Along with these things, patience is essential. The teamster must not rush the team but give them adequate time to think, comprehend, and act correctly in response to the command. With that said, the team must be expected to respond, and the teamster needs to be persistent with every command, with patience.

Within all of this comes the fifth rule, which is to be consistent. Cattle recognize each and every thing the teamster says, and therefore it is important for the teamster to be consistent with the way they command, signal, and cue the team. Inconsistency creates confusion and does not lead to the most effective team possible. Lastly, the sixth rule brings all these things together in the way that if these things are not done regularly and repeatedly, the team will not come together to work well. To build a strong, hardworking team, these rules must be followed with every workout, and workouts must occur often and on a regular basis.

(2) Second, to dive deeper into the ten-step training schedule developed by Dr. Conroy; The first step in training a team is teaching them to follow when being led. Second is to make the team accustomed to being touched and handled by humans. In these first two steps, each steer in the team should be taught the five basic commands individually: step up, whoa, gee, haw, and back. Third is to begin introducing the yoke, once both animals in the team lead well individually and have a basic understanding of the five basic commands, and this step involves the team just

standing in the yoke. The next step is to introduce starting and stopping to the team, and the most important command is whoa, since that command is what keeps the teamster in control of the team. After the team is proficient in those two commands, it is time to begin turning by slowing down one animal and bringing the other around by keeping them walking. Once a team has accomplished learning these commands and is working and walking as a team, it is time to hitch them to a load. This step can be intimidating, as the noise of a cart or stoneboat following the team can startle them. The teamster must introduce these new noises slowly and allow for the cattle to become familiar and comfortable with them before hitching the team.

To continue progress in all these first steps, the seventh step is to practice often. Continue practicing these steps with a diverse workout routine. Within these workouts, avoid the temptation of using lead ropes to get the team to listen. The teamster must force themselves not to rely heavily on halters. The sooner the team can work independently of the halter and lead rope, and the sooner they respond to voice commands and the body positioning of the teamster, the better. This comes with a shared trust between the team and their teamster. To step up the level of ability of a team, the teamster must come up with new and intriguing challenges for the team to overcome alongside the teamster. Within this, it is extremely important that the teamster ensures that they are the ones training the team, and the team is not training them. This is contingent on the challenges the teamster provides and the way the teamster commands the team to overcome those challenges. The teamster must not let the team predict what the next command will be, in order to maintain control and train the team to always wait and listen for instructions. This keeps the teamster as head of the team, rather than the team outsmarting the teamster.

Lastly, it is vital that each and every work session ends on a good note. Cattle remember everything, and if they notice that they are let out of work when they behave badly, they will behave badly whenever they want to get out of work. It is all about habits and routines, and if the teamster instils a poor habit, such as work being ended when behavior is not appropriate, that will become an extra challenge that the teamster will need to now work the team out of. It is important for the teamster to remember to only use positive reinforcement, such as ending a workout that is

followed by feeding time, when the team has actually succeeded. Using excessive negative reinforcement can result in a team that is stick-shy or uncooperative in work. In conclusion, these ten steps can be adapted for each teamster and team, and serve as a basis for the necessary attributes in a training regimen.

### **Tips and Tricks**

When creating a workout plan and working to increase the effectiveness of a team, it is helpful to be knowledgeable of the tricks of the trade. As a first piece of advice, it is crucial to keep a team mentally engaged and attentive. To do this, it is important to avoid repetitiveness in a workout regimen, as oxen can become bored with doing similar activities day after day. If workouts become too repetitive, a team is more likely to stop paying attention, grow lazy, or become stubborn. Dr. Conroy suggested that the greatest solution to this problem of boredom in a workout routine is to do real work. His opinion is that doing real and necessary work is more effective in training a team than doing constant drills. As stated in his book *Oxen: A Teamster's Guide*, "real work is an excellent training aid, acting as a restraint while continuously exposing the team and teamster to new challenges," (Conroy 81). Some ideas to incorporate into a workout plan are constantly changing directions and work patterns, as one works to complete a varied choice of tasks. Through this, make the goal in a workout routine to be avoiding building predictable movement habits, as this keeps a team on their toes and listening to the teamster for each move.

One other piece of advice when training a team is to ensure that the team is praised when they succeed in a skill or task. This helps build confidence and a relationship between the oxen and teamster. The more the team feels confident and ready, the greater amount of success they will have. The teamster must be sure that they encourage and build the team up, rather than only interacting with the team with the goad when they are making mistakes.

Another common obstacle that teamsters have to manage, mainly for a team in their adolescence, is off-season mischief. During times of rest and recovery, or when a team is not being worked or taught new things, they can grow restless and bored. Oxen still need stimulation during rest periods, and providing objects that engage the animals' minds and allow them to interact with

them helps this. An example that Dr. Conroy gave to enrich a team's off-season time is dropping a tree into the pasture for the animals to chew and play with. This mental activity helps maintain attentiveness and moderate the animal's behavior.

When asked what the most common mistakes he sees new teamsters make, Dr. Conroy expressed three main concerns. He stated that new teamsters underestimate the time commitment that training a team requires, and that most do not understand the patience, repetition, and consistency that it takes to build a reliable team. Second, new teamsters often do not realize how important having the proper equipment is, as a growing team requires multiple yokes, and the equipment must fit properly in order to improve the comfort of the animals, and in turn the performance. Third, he emphasized that teamsters do not truly understand how important body positioning is when training a team. Dr. Conroy said that consistent positioning of the handler by the team is necessary in training a team, and oxen naturally follow the teamster, and standing in the same position improves communication and predictability between the team and teamster. As an anecdote to explain this, Dr. Conroy mentioned that even when he visits other countries and works with teams that are trained in different languages, he has always been able to successfully drive those teams because of the way he understands where to stand when driving a team.

An effective teamster must be ready to adapt, as each and every team and animal reacts differently to training. Sticking to the general concepts of training that are traditional is important, but slightly adapting methods allows for greater performance. Successful training involves more than physical strength of the team, and a strong ox team depends on consistency first and foremost, along with mental engagement, proper equipment, and patience.

## Biblical Connection and Worldview

There are a majority of different ways that biblical allegories can be drawn from Scripture surrounding the topic of oxen and of yokes. Throughout Scripture, oxen often symbolize strength, sacrifice, endurance, and faithful labor. Along with these, the yoke represents submission, guidance, and shared burdens. These images appear repeatedly in both the Old and New

Testaments, and they reveal spiritual truths concerning the relationship between God and His people. From the passage in Proverbs that describes the abundance that comes through the strength of the ox, to Christ's invitation for believers to take His yoke upon them, these agricultural metaphors provide deep imagery of discipleship, sanctification, and the grace of God. The image of the ox and yoke demonstrates that fruitful Christian living is not achieved through comfort, but instead through humble dependence upon God as one endures hardships and submits to the leadership of Christ. Overall, this section will explore several biblical allegories connected to oxen and yokes, particularly focusing on the cost of fruitfulness, Christ as the loving teamster who guides His people through wisdom and discipline, and the yoke of Christ that offers true spiritual rest. Together, these allegories do point back to the central focus of Scripture, and that is Jesus Christ, who bore the heaviest burden of sin on behalf of humanity so that believers might walk beside Him in grace, obedience, and eternal life.

### **The Cost of Fruitfulness**

In Scripture, oxen symbolize sacrificial labor, dependence, and the work that accompanies spiritual fruitfulness. Proverbs 14:4 teaches that the abundance of anything always has a cost that is first necessary. It states, "*Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox come abundant harvests*" (Prov 14:4 NIV). This principle ultimately points to the Gospel itself, where Christ brought eternal harvest of life through suffering, sacrifice, and the mess of our sin being put upon His shoulders on the cross.

This piece of wisdom carries allegorical value, as it presents a vivid agricultural image that displays a spiritual truth, and that is that fruitful living as a Christian and a human requires labor, sacrifice, and inconvenience. Some may think that a clean manger sounds desirable, as it means there is no dirty work necessary, since there is no ox creating a mess of manure. This lack of maintenance sounds pleasing; however, a clean barn means there are no oxen. Oxen in the ancient world represented power, productivity, and provision. If the barn is clean and there are no oxen, then the people do not have any of these outcomes. The farmer may avoid the expense and work

on keeping oxen, but they will not produce the profitable crop that requires the strength of the oxen for an abundant harvest (2 Thes 3:10).

The ox in Proverbs 14:4 also becomes an allegory for the strength and labor necessary for spiritual growth. Oxen are engines of the ancient agricultural world, and their strength multiplied what man could accomplish alone. Without oxen, it is a simpler, cleaner life for the farmer. However, the farmer cannot harvest the fruits and crops of his labor without the mess of keeping cattle. This connects to ministry, parenting, discipleship, and friendship, as these all come with messy work that must be done before benefits can be achieved. Fruitful living and serving often require difficult labor and emotional investment, but avoiding these difficulties means one is sacrificing the richness of genuine love and community obtained through this missional living. Galatians 6:9 offers a reminder to Christians, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” Similar to the farmer accepting the mess of the ox for the sake of the harvest, Christians are called to embrace the labor of loving others earnestly and working hard to provide for the sake of spiritual fruitfulness in the kingdom of God.

This can also be a reminder for believers to trust God in difficult and messy circumstances, because God often produces His greatest fruit through hardship. Abundant harvests emerge from struggle, inconvenience, and suffering through hard work. Receiving abundant fruit in the life of a Christian will not always be clean and often involves a mess that God will work through to produce a blessing that is far beyond what can be imagined or planned by man. His plan is always more grand than any man can fathom, and messy situations point the believer back to the promises of God. Galatians 50:20 points to a truthful aspect about the way God works through trials and frustrations, saying, “as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”. Along with this, Romans 8:28 offers a similar promise made by God, “all things work together for the good of those who love Him”. This proverb teaches that the mess of life is often evidence that God is at work to produce a blessing and gift that will have eternal value. The believer is therefore called not merely to endure hardship, but to be hard-working and not allow laziness to hold back the grandeur of the blessings the Lord has in store. God’s promises can also offer comfort to the

Christian, as He says he is using even the most painful circumstances for His glory and the good of those who love Him.

Ultimately, the allegory of the ox in these Proverbs points most powerfully to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The cross on which He was crucified appeared messy and hopeless, yet through Christ's enduring the suffering of sin and death came the abundant harvest of salvation. Just as the strength of the ox produced abundance, so much greater did the sacrificial suffering of Christ produce eternal life for sinners. Christ faced this work with joy. (Hebrews 12:2). He did not cover away from the burdensome and messy work necessary to make a bridge between sinners and the wrath of God. Jesus dirtied himself, emptied himself, and made himself nothing in order to bring forth the greatest harvest of salvation for lost souls.

This leads to the call for Christians to be willing to embrace the necessary cost of fruitful service and living. The Lord has not called His followers to embrace what is easy and comfortable. In fact, He has done the exact opposite in calling His people to follow after Him while carrying their own crosses (Luke 9:23). The road to salvation is narrow and difficult, however the harvest at the end is the door that leads to eternal life (Matthew 7:13). Embracing the cost of discipleship, the cost of hard work on this side of eternity, and giving up this life for the sake of Christ will ultimately lead the Christian to the work of Christ on the cross, by His grace and mercy. Choosing to live the messy life of a servant is the road to the greatest abundance of life, and those who are humble will in the end be exalted (Matthew 19:30). The life that Jesus calls Christians to live is as messy as a used manger, it is as fruitful as the most abundant harvest. The resurrection of Jesus proves that God works in ways that bring life from suffering, and beauty from brokenness, and therefore Christians must not let hardship blind them to the eternal harvest God is producing through faithful endurance.

### **Christ as the Teamster: The Goad of Grace**

Another way of applying the allegory of oxen is to view Christ as the human teamster. In this way, Christ is the driver of our steps and has set the path before us. He is directing us on our walk in this life. Through this, He is also good to us and disciplines us (Proverbs 15:10). In Acts

26, God confronts Saul because he has been persecuting God's people, while thinking that he was serving God. In verse 14 of this chapter, God said to the "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads*" (Acts 26:14 ESV). God himself tells Saul in this section that He is trying to teach Saul and deliver him from the path of sinfulness that he is on. However, Saul has been resisting instruction and correction from the Lord and has been metaphorically kicking against the loving guidance of God. Saul has been struggling with a spiritual resistance to God's divine guidance. When Saul is responding in this way to God's instruction, it is only making it harder for Saul. It is similar for oxen, because the goad only becomes a tool of pain if its guidance is ignored. However, once the animal listens to the wise direction of the teamster, it does not feel the pain of discipline through the firmness of the goad any longer. It is easier when we submit to the power of God and listen to what He teaches, otherwise when we choose to disobey God, we become like the rebellious ox, which only drives the goad deeper and deeper (Proverbs 13:15). Therefore, heed the voice and conviction of God, as resisting God's authority only punishes and hurts us as we consequently require redirecting.

In Acts 26:14, God is referencing the Old Testament piece of wisdom found in Ecclesiastes, which states, "the words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). This illustrates how a farmer displays wise instruction; it is taught by the goad. Similar to how God speaks words of wisdom, but when needed, these words are correcting and redirecting. This verse from Ecclesiastes connects to the story of Saul because God is the Shepherd who is leading Saul in loving correction, and He is the wisdom that acts as a goad when necessary. Also, Saul's resistance to God's instruction causes suffering for him, just as resistance to wisdom leads to trouble.

Understanding how oxen were actually trained in history makes this allegory much deeper. Young oxen would be trained gradually, starting with a yoke of oxen, then had a young ox beside an older, experienced ox, and together they would slowly be taught commands. They would receive direction from the voice of the teamster, and gently with a goad. Whenever there was stubbornness, correction would be made early on. The goal of the goad was not cruelty, but it was

to make the team useful, orderly, and cooperative. This has a beautiful connection to Scripture, as Jesus says, ‘take my yoke upon you, and learn of me’ in Matthew 11:29. The yoke symbolizes submission, shared labor, and alignment with the master’s direction. This is similar to what the yoke of Christ represents, as that is submission to the commands and will of Christ, Christ bearing the burden of sin for us, and Christians bearing the burden of the world together, and sanctification as we learn to be more aligned with the character of Jesus. As the ox becomes more trained and experienced, it goes from pulling unevenly and wandering to enduring and trusting the teamster. Spiritually, humans behave similarly to the guidance of Christ as Christians learn trust and obedience to God.

Along with the positive side of training oxen, there is the negative and difficult side. At times, a stubborn ox may kick back in response to the correction of a goad. This resistance causes the ox to become exhausted, injured, or just useless, as it makes the work harder than it needed to be. This correlates directly to the story of God converting Saul to Paul, as he also rebelled against the wise correction of God, as he resisted conviction, truth, calling, and correction. This resistance only increased the pain Saul felt, as he was struck blind following this moment, out of the loving rebuke of God (Hebrews 12:6). Following this, Saul benefited from the discipline of God, as he was converted. After this transformation, Saul’s name was changed to Paul, and Paul became yoked to Christ, guided by the Spirit, and remained obedient even through suffering. This former rebel of an ox became a willing servant to the loving Shepherd of his soul.

### **The Yoke that Gives Rest**

The previous section flows beautifully into this one, as Christ is the good Shepherd who is there to teach and lead His people. Christ desires a relationship with those who choose to follow him, and when he offers up His yoke, His Cross that He carried as a sacrifice for those who love Him, He does not leave to live life alone. Jesus declared, “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,*” (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV). It seems almost ironic that Christ should offer a yoke, which

often refers to hard work, immediately after calling the heavy laden to find rest in him. However, this invitation to choose to be yoked with Christ is an invitation to walk with him and learn from him. Jesus is the ultimate example of how to live as Christians, and the goal of a Christian is sanctification to be more like Jesus and to reflect more of his character and love. Again, Christ is yoked with us, pulling our burden with us, and it is easy for us because this yoke will not be painful. Rather, this yoke Jesus offers is tailor-made for us, just as oxen need wellfitting yokes. Rest for our souls is found in Christ, and taking up his yoke and learning from Him is a form of rest for our souls, not necessarily rest for our bodies or minds. Leaning on Christ refreshes our souls, and through this Christ is right beside us, helping us as we submit to His will for the work in our lives. We will also be guided in our direction in life, as He is with us through each step.

In this passage, Christ is speaking of the spiritual burden put upon His people that required works, which the Pharisees taught through oppressive religion. Christ sought to remove this burden of works, as the Pharisees taught of a burdensome yoke of self-righteousness and legalistic law-keeping salvation. Jesus clearly declares that this is a heavy burden of a yoke, since there is no amount of lawfulness that can bridge the gap between human sinfulness and God's holiness (Romans 3:20, Isaiah 64:6). Jesus offers rest from this heavy burden, since it is spiritually exhausting to try to earn the way into heaven by this oppressive yoke of self-righteousness. His yoke is one of repentance and faith, and by the grace of God, these things are made possible for us when we choose to walk with Him. (1 John 5:3). Jesus's burden is light for Christians because He has already carried the burden we were meant to carry. Through Christ's act of obedience on the cross, we are freed from this burden of sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ is offering to replace that crushing burden of earning God's favor with His own teachings, which are characterized by grace. Our obedience in response will be 'light' for us since it is our act of spiritual worship, rather than a heavy spiritual burden (Romans 12:1). Through this, we are sanctified, and this is the work of the Holy Spirit within us and does not spiritually exhaust us in the way that working for salvation does. Ultimately, Jesus is promising that following Him leads to 'rest' for the soul because His burden is 'light', meaning it is designed to bring peace rather than spiritual exhaustion. Aligning

oneself with Christ in this way allows the believer to learn to work in tandem with Him and submit to His direction.

### **Conclusion**

The biblical imagery of oxen and yokes reveals profound spiritual truths about the Christian life, discipleship, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each allegory of these found in Scripture points back to Jesus Christ, as He is the good Shepherd who lovingly guides His flock, and the faithful companion who walks beside His people in every hardship. Through Him, Christians can learn that God often produces His greatest blessings through sacrifice, discipline, and endurance. Therefore, Christians are called not to avoid the cost of discipleship, but to embrace the hope of knowing that Christ is working to sanctify Christians into His likeness. Believers can confidently endure the burdens of this world, as Christ promises a yoke of eternal spiritual rest, abundant spiritual fruit, and everlasting fellowship with God.

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