

Animals in the Bible

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.*

Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?

In God's hand is the life of every living thing.

Job 12: 7-10

On this day when we take time to give thanks for and ask God's blessing on the animal companions in our world and life, it is also a good time to think for a minute about the role animals play throughout the biblical story. After all, whether you consider the natural evolution of life on this planet or the liturgical description of creation in Genesis, clearly the animals, the birds, the sea creatures were here long before we humans were. And the way we are treating the world, they might well outlast us as well.

Even if you casually leaf through the pages of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, you can't help but notice that it is teeming with wildlife. Not only in quantity, but the Bible records a surprisingly wide variety of animal species, from donkeys and doves to frogs and flies. And even though our interest in the story is predominantly concerned with the relationship between the Creator and the human creatures, the other parts of creations have their place.

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that animals play such a large role in the Bible. Back when these stories were compiled, when the culture and economy were based primarily in agriculture, people lived a bit closer to nature and were more exposed to wildlife, both flora and fauna, than we are in our industrialized, boxed-in world. We have to make an effort to get out of our houses and into nature, where our biblical ancestors lived most of their days in the company of livestock and closer to the natural habitat of wildlife. So, naturally, when they were pressed to explain some abstract concept, they often made comparisons to the animal life all around them. When they were faced with a dangerous, life-threatening situation, what came to mind were lions and tigers and bears (oh my!) along with other wild creatures. Gazelles and deer express the grace and beauty of a loved one. Horses are a sign of power, but not always in the best sense. Several psalms use horses and chariots as images of warfare, and warn about the folly of trusting in brute force rather than in the power of justice and mercy.

The story of Jesus in the gospels wouldn't be complete without a whole menagerie of animals. Take a look at your nativity scene and you may see as many cows, sheep, donkeys, and camels as there are human characters. And don't forget that Jesus was born in a stable, in quarters for domestic animals, and was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for livestock. And if you look in the rafters of the stable that I like to set up at Christmas, you'll even find a gecko. By the way, I learned that the gecko gets a mention in Leviticus (Lev 11:30), and that a species known as *Hemidactylus turcicus*, or Mediterranean house gecko, is native to and still common in the region that includes Palestine and Israel. Towards the end of the gospel narrative, on Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and that animal choice had wide implications; it tells us something about how we are to understand the role of Jesus as King and Messiah.

Jesus himself had quite a bit to say about animals. In his teaching about anxiety over material things, he instructs us to consider the birds of the air: “they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.” (Matt 6:26) He tells that great joke about how much easier it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (Matt 19:24) And when he warns the Pharisees about hypocrisy, enforcing the letter of the law in small things but neglecting the weightier matters of justice and mercy, he says that they “strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” (Matt 23:24)

When Jesus hears that Herod is out to get him, he calls him a fox and then follows that with a lament over Jerusalem: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Luke 13: 32, 34) But in another place, Jesus says that foxes have their dens and birds have their nests, but a prophet like himself has no place to lay his head. (Matt 8:20)

Sheep, of course, are mentioned more than any other animal in the Bible, both literally and figuratively. Psalm 23, among the most quoted verses, is based on the relationship between sheep and shepherd. There is the parable that Jesus tells in which a shepherd leaves behind 99 sheep in the fold to go out and search for the one lost lamb. (Luke 15: 3-7) John’s Gospel has a whole chapter on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and his followers are compared to the sheep he knows and tends to. (John 10) And in Matthew’s Gospel, at the last judgment where Jesus compares the ruler of the universe to a shepherd who divides sheep from goats, it is the sheep who recognize Christ in their neighbors, and unwittingly honor him by giving food to the hungry and shelter to those who are homeless. (Matt 25: 31-46) And, of course, the ultimate image of Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1: 29)

Jesus also draws on the contrast between vulnerable sheep and predatory wolves. In a warning about false prophets he may have even invented the saying about being wary of a wolf in sheep’s clothing. (Matt 7:15) And then, when he was sending the disciples out on their own, he adds two more animals comparisons. He tells them “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Matt 10:16)

Sheep get a lot of press in the Bible, but so do birds of all kinds. Sometimes, as in the parable of Jesus we mentioned, the reference is generic, to all the birds of the air. Other times, the Bible names different species. When the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness, along with manna, God sent quails. (Exod. 16:13) When the prophet Elijah was hiding in a wilderness spot, ravens brought him food every day. (1 Kings 17: 6) One of the most touching images in the Psalms, illustrating God’s care for even the smallest of creatures, comes in Psalm 84, describing the Temple in Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, where “even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for her young.”

The dove, of course, is the probably the most noted of biblical birds. When the ark carrying Noah and all the animals finally beached on dry land, he sent out a dove and when it returned with an olive leaf in its beak, he knew that the waters had subsided. (Gen 8:11) More than just a signal that it was safe to disembark onto dry land, it was a sign that God had already begun the healing and renewal of creation; it was a sign of reconciliation. Ever since, the dove and olive branch have been a symbol of peace and reconciliation. All four gospels record that as Jesus emerged from the water of baptism in the Jordan River, the Spirit descended on him, and it appeared like a dove. (Mark 1: 10, et. al.)

We could spend hours just naming all the species of animals listed in the Bible, and not just the obvious ones, like sheep and dove, but odd mentions of hedgehogs, scorpions, herons, fleas, badgers, ostrich, crocodiles, storks, and ants. And I can't let this survey go by without my favorite mention of an animal in the Bible. It comes from line in Psalm 104, which Mary read earlier. In the middle of praising God for the plenitude and diversity of creation, the psalmist says, "Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great." And in a line that we did not include in the earlier reading, it says, "There go the ships, and Leviathan that your formed to sport in it." Now, it is not entirely clear what sea creature is meant by "Leviathan," but I like to think of it as something like the massive blue whale. And what is most outstanding to me is that God put this creature in the sea, as the psalm says, "to sport it in," to just play around. It says something about both Creator and creation that God takes a playful delight in this gentle giant.

But all this consideration of animals is about more than just biblical trivial pursuit. It helps us realize a few things.

It reminds us that we humans are not the exclusive concern of the Creator. The Bible is clear that the relationship between God and creation includes more than just the human creatures, it includes all of creation, including the animal life. One of the most vivid images of God's full reconciliation with and restoration of creation comes from the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 11, which we usually read during Advent, the prophet describes a messianic age which we now associate with the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. And the reign of this Messiah is marked by a return to God's original intention for creation, which the prophet describes in these terms: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, and their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." That reconciliation of all things, that full knowledge of God includes more than just the human creatures; it includes reconciled animal life and the complete integration of all life in creation.

There is a section in the Book of Job where Job is defending himself and his knowledge of the ways of God in the world. And he suggests that we could learn something from observing the natural world, and especially wildlife. He says, "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In [God's] hand is the life of every living thing." (Job 12: 7-10) Job suggests that the non-human creatures share with the human creatures in an awareness of our common dependence upon a Creator as the source of life. Which is what St. Francis of Assisi tried to teach us when he included birds and rabbits and all living things in his prayers and worship and sermon, even preaching to the birds, according to one legend.

Now, here is a strange irony about animals in the Bible. Of all the creatures in the world, we modern humans have formed our closest bonds to dogs and cats. And yet, cats are never mentioned in the Bible at all, and when dogs are mentioned it is never in a good light. They are either involved in some kind of heinous activity or they are considered

unclean. But, on the other hand, read that section of Paul's letter to the Romans, where he lays out the practical implications of the Christian faith: letting your love be genuine, showing affection, celebrating with those who rejoice, showing empathy with those who are sad—all those signs of unconditional love and genuine affection. Sometimes I wonder if our animal companions understand and embody those qualities much better than we human creatures.

May we continue to learn from, live with, honor, and care for all creatures great and small.

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