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Transforming Biblical Animals

> We need to reread the Bible because, at bottom, the one to be sorriest for in this whole story is the snake!
>
> —Jacques Derrida

Biblical ideas about animals and animality have played a significant role in shaping human-animal relations. From Noah's ordered remnant to Paul's groaning creation, from the prohibited bestiality of Leviticus to the interspecies peace of Isaiah, from Job's leviathan to John's apocalyptic dragon, not to mention the slandered snake and all the herded and sacrificed sheep, goats and lambs, the Bible boasts a fascinating menagerie. These stories and characters have profoundly influenced concepts and practices in domains as diverse as biology and philosophy, politics and popular culture. Our relationships with other species—both warring and peaceful, tempestuous and tamed—have been shaped, on a world-historical and thus, in the geohistorical "now" of the Anthropocene, on a planetary and evolutionary scale, by the Christian dispensation and all that has followed it. As Élisabeth de Fontenay puts it, "The advent of Christianity as a dominant theoretico-practical and onto-political system marks, within the sphere of the living, a rupture whose consequences have not ceased to structure our relationship to the animal."[1]

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[1] Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Le silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 243. Translation mine.

Central to this restructuring has been the human hoarding of meaningfulness that has enabled the silencing and domination of nonhuman worlds. The interpretation and reception of the Bible—both explicit and diffuse, expert and everyday—has been pivotal in the weaponising of God's image against the earth and its other inhabitants.

Lynn White Jr. infamously saw the roots of the ecological crisis in the religious worldview of medieval Christianity, which interpreted the Genesis creation stories as separating humankind from nature: "Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them.... no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes."[2] Combating the planetary ill-effects of this deep-rooted hostility to nature requires that we "rethink our axioms" underlying the modern fusion of science and technology.[3] White locates this axiomatic battle in biblical and theological disputation and their scientific and metaphysical extension, that is, internal to Western Christianity and its secular and postsecular legacies: the proper front to join is that where the Franciscan equality of ensouled creatures is preached against the orthodoxy of "Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world".[4]

Countless others have challenged, qualified or expanded White's diagnosis of Christianity's anthropocentrism. Importantly, they often do so not only by multiplying historical factors and turning-points—whether Mediterranean Hellenism or medieval heresy[5]—but also by engaging in the textual melee of biblical hermeneutics themselves. In the book on Gaia's earthly polity that emerged from his Gifford Lectures on natural religion, Bruno Latour steps into the fray:

> The religious origin of the ecological crisis is indisputable; I hope you understand this, but not at all for the reason given

[2] Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155:3767 (March 10, 1967), 1205. Similar biblical readings inaugurate animal ethics, such as in the "Bible" of animal rights itself: "there is nothing to challenge the over-all view, set down in Genesis, that man is the pinnacle of creation, that all the other creatures have been delivered into his hands, and that he has divine permission to kill and eat them." See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (London: Cape, 1976), 205.

[3] Ibid., 1204.

[4] Ibid., 1205.

[5] See, for example, Éric Baratay, "L'anthropocentrisme du Christianisme occidental," in Boris Cyrulnick, ed., *Si les lions pouvaient parler: Essais sur la condition animale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 1448.

> in Lynn White's overly famous article that accused Christianity of having reified matter and given man absolute mastery over living beings. Something has indeed happened that has made a very large number of pious minds indifferent to the fate of one specific type of being, the type usually associated with materiality interpreted as matter. But if there is a historical origin of the ecological crisis, it is not because the Christian religion has made the created world contemptible but, rather, because that religion, sometime between the thirteenth century and the eighteenth, lost its initial vocation by becoming Gnostic, before passing the torch to the superficially irreligious forms of counter-religion.[6]

Still, he argues, Christians have indeed abandoned the cosmos, cared only about humans, become attached to spirit and thus forsaken the earth: "they are no longer in a position to do their duty by *defending materiality, unjustly accused, against matter, unduly spiritualized*. They need to be reminded of the celebrated evangelical injunction, inverted: 'What use is it if you save your soul, if it means losing the world?'"[7] This reference to Matthew 16:26 is not the only time Latour turns to scripture to augment his philosophical argumentation; earlier, he writes: "If Gaia could speak, it would say, like Jesus: 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matt 10:34). Or, more violently still, as in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas: 'I have cast fire upon the world, and behold, I guard it until it is ablaze.'"[8] In our apocalyptic present, then, we are engaged in a battle of speculative biblical interpretation, in which both the characters and the stakes are no less than our increasingly sensitive planet and its rapidly disappearing creatures.[9]

Many are today engaged in the ecocritical and zoocritical reconsideration of this textual heritage.[10] The Earth Bible project has developed ecolog-

[6] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 210.

[7] Ibid., 211.

[8] Ibid., 144, citing *GThom* 10.

[9] As Adam Trexler understatedly puts it in his chapter on deluge narratives: "With climate change, stories about floods take on new significance, indicating a global problem ultimately traceable to human actions." Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 83.

[10] These approaches can be contrasted to the attempt to "separate fact from fiction"

ical biblical hermeneutics across a number of pathbreaking volumes, while Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'* likewise insists on the erroneousness of the anthropocentric interpretation of the Creation accounts, pairing the mandate to "have dominion" (Gen 1:28) over the Earth with that to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15) and emphasising "a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature".[11] The dynamics and potentialities of Genesis, and in particular the scene in which God watches as Adam names the animals, are also at the centre of Jacques Derrida's essay on the animal question, which seeks to short-circuit the hierarchy of God and man over the animals with the figure of an inhuman divinanimality.[12] While Derrida's argument has been widely influential within animal studies, its biblical themes have not always been legible to its audience.[13] Some recent scholarship has sought to fill this gap, expounding on Derrida's engagement with biblical texts and deconstructing other verses and domains in turn.[14] At the same time, posthumanist approaches have complicated the Bible's speciesism, drawing out its "multiple moments of disruption, boundary crossing, and category confusion: animals speak, God becomes man, spirits haunt the living, and monsters confound at the end."[15]

through a natural-historical method of sorts in Michael Bright, *Beasts of the Field: The Revealing Natural History of Animals in the Bible* (London: Robson Books, 2006), 1.

[11] See Norman C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), and the rest of The Earth Bible series; Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, May 24, 2015), §§66–67. For a range of responses to *Laudato si'*, including by Latour, see the special commentary section in vol. 8, no. 2 of *Environmental Humanities*, edited by Matthew Chrulew and Bronislaw Szerszynski.

[12] See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Matthew Chrulew, "Feline Divinanimality: Derrida and the Discourse of Species in Genesis," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2, no. 2 (2006): 18.23.

[13] In the abridged version of Derrida's first lecture reprinted in Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity* (London: Continuum, 2004), the passages on Genesis were excised.

[14] Stephen D. Moore, ed., *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Hannah M. Strømmen, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2018).

[15] Jennifer Koosed, "Humanity at Its Limits," in Jennifer Koosed, ed., *The Bible and Posthumanism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2014), 3. On the animal question in religion more broadly, see for example Aaron Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

It is to this discussion that this special issue of *Relegere* seeks to add, by bringing together the fields of reception studies and animal studies to explore the afterlives of scriptural beasts. How has the animality expressed, represented, forbidden or redeemed in biblical texts been received and transformed in the discourses and dispositives that followed? In collecting the work of a number of established and emerging researchers, we hope to advance scholarship on biblical animalities and even to give aid and ammunition to the resistance—heretofore mostly underground—against Christian exceptionalism's war on animals.

Yael Klangwisan takes up Hélène Cixous's reading of the "He-Bible", and its Levitical injunctions against unclean and abominable animals, alongside Clarice Lispector's resistance to this othering in the mythopoetic experimentation of *The Passion according to G.H.* A feminist, dirty, deconstructive reading, Klangwisan suggests, unfolds a shadow Bible in which animals, not subjected to the banishment of the law, instead inhabit a paradisaical "root".

The legacy of biblical animals is, of course, not only textual but also scientific and practical. Ethology, the science of animal behaviour, is shot through with biblical tropes and Christian theologemes—one need only think of Konrad Lorenz's reference to the misreading of I Kings 4:33 that led to the legend of King Solomon's communication with animals, a fabled ability the scientist does not hesitate to claim for himself.[16] Vinciane Despret's remarkable foray through the history and philosophy of ethology, *Quand le loup habitera avec l'agneau*, draws its title, epigraph and many themes from the famous prophecy of Isaiah 11:6-8.[17] Translated here is the fourth chapter of that book, which reads the nineteenth-century naturalist Edward Pett Thompson's *The Passions of Animals* (a work not without influence in early animal psychology) with an eye to its reception of the prophetic tradition.[18] This is a legacy with which constructivist philosophy of science, and the ex-

[16] Konrad Z. Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (Methuen, 1961 [1952]), xxix.

[17] Vinciane Despret, *Quand le loup habitera avec l'agneau* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/Le Seuil, 2002). For more from this and other works of Despret's, see *Angelaki* 20, no. 2 (2015), republished as Brett Buchanan, Matthew Chrulew and Jeffrey Bussolini, eds., *The Philosophical Ethology of Vinciane Despret* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

[18] In the course of the exegesis by which, as Despret points out, he ingeniously makes room for the capabilities and improvability of animals, Thompson provides his own catalogue of "the constant passages in the Scriptures representing the creation, and the conditions of the animal kingdom especially". Edward Pett Thompson, *The Passions of Animals* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851), 1-6 (4).

periments in cosmopolitical understanding and cohabitation it seeks to analyse and invigorate, is not yet done.

Eric Daryl Meyer explores the theological anthropology of Gregory of Nyssa, whose treatise *De hominis opificio* works to differentiate the human resemblance to divinity from the unstable appetites of animality. As Meyer shows both here with reference to the church father and more widely in his recent book, for all that they are disavowed, both references to humanity's inner bestial nature and comparisons to the anatomical, physiological and behavioural characteristics of nonhuman creatures remain crucial to the theological, philosophical and anthropological task of delimiting the human.[19]

Michael J. Gilmour—whose has elucidated the biblical menagerie in previous work[20]—here turns to C.S. Lewis, whose poetic reimagining of 2 Kings 19:35 with mice in place of angels forms part of a wider pattern of theriophilic Bible readings that find places for animals within Christian discourse. His sensitive imagination "baptised" into a mature animal ethics and theology by fantasist George MacDonald, Lewis performs creative rereadings of the Bible using lowly, vulnerable mice to chasten human hubris.[21]

Mark Payne asks just what an ark is. This rhetorical figure, "the prototype of all animal saving … the protected place in a chaotic earth", so crucial to the imagination of counter-apocalypse, continues to shape sciences of animal redemption such as conservation biology and zoo biology.[22] With the lively insight familiar to readers of his book *The Animal Part*, Payne identifies a diverse range of arks and their melancholic modes of collecting—in comedy and poetry, film and reggae, psychoanalysis and technoscience, Creationism and conservation—and traces the contours of these salvific containers holding out for future survival.[23]

[19] See Eric Daryl Meyer, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

[20] Michael J. Gilmour, *Eden's Other Residents: The Bible and Animals* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014).

[21] See further Michael J. Gilmour, *Animals in the Writings of C. S. Lewis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[22] Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington: Island Press, 1996), 231. A quick scan of spines on my zoo studies shelf reveals titles referring to ethics on the ark, policy after the ark, stationary and crowded arks, the Noah's ark syndrome, and lifeboats to Ararat. On the biblical utopia shaping zoos, see Matthew Chrulew, "From Zoo to Zoöpolis: Effectively Enacting Eden," in *Metamorphoses of the Zoo: Animal Encounter after Noah*, ed. Ralph R. Acampora (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 213–14.

[23] Mark Payne, *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*

Beatrice Marovich takes up the experience of animals in digital media, reflecting on the internet's particular taste for interspecies friendship.[24] Engaging with the reception history of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, Marovich argues that it both models for coexistence with other animals, and also serves to justify escapism and exploitation. This is just as true of its digital iteration, which for all the viral cat videos and cute animal gifs also has its dark side. Drawing on both Simone Weil and Giorgio Agamben, Marovich searches out a mode of creatureliness in which the human is retracted and vulnerable connections are formed.

Expanding on the argument of his *Beyond the Word of a Woman*—which performed a feminist ethological reading of the Syrophoenician woman's encounter with Jesus—Alan Cadwallader triangulates three key rehearsals of this story, in Mark, Matthew, and the Clementina. Cadwallader gives priority to the dogs, both in terms of their rhetorical use within the texts, and their transformation across various early Christian contexts, particularly as a means for the regulation of the woman's embodied word, affirmed by Jesus in the Markan version, that would undermine the othering of children and animals.[25]

Hannah Strømmen likewise engages with biblical phallogocentrism, turning to the representation of the whore and beast in Revelation 17 and their political usage, as emblems of the evil enemy, to demonise women and animals. Seeking to rewire the text through a deconstructive reading of its animalised and sexualised images of sovereignty, Strømmen articulates the shared vulnerability that these images instead reveal.[26] Like others in this volume and elsewhere, while illustrating and exploring its zoopolitical legacy, she reads the Bible against itself, and against its anthropocentric history of interpretation.

Transforming biblical animals, then: a noisy, teeming faunal assemblage that has been profoundly transformative of human-animal relations, and that is itself persistently subject to transformative reading and reinvention as we seek ways of inscribing animality, and relating to nonhuman animals, otherwise.

(Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[24] For an embedded walk-through, see the excerpt of *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* published as Vinciane Despret, "Y for YouTube", trans. Brett Buchanan, *Ctrl-Z* 6 (2016).

[25] See Alan H. Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman: Recovering the Bodies of the Syrophoenician Women* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008).

[26] See further Strømmen, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*.