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Biblical Creatures

*The Animal as an Object
of Interpretation in Pre-Modern
Christian and Jewish
Hermeneutic Traditions*



Karel Appel, *Femmes, enfants, animaux*, 1951: oil on jute, 170 x 280 cm
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Biblical Creatures

The Animal as an Object of Interpretation in Pre-Modern Christian and Jewish Hermeneutic Traditions – an Introduction

1. See for example DeMello; Waldau; Rossini and Tyler; Spannring *et al.*; Taylor and Signal.

In recent years, the growing field of ‘Human-Animal Studies’ has done much to bring animals into the focus of a variety of academic disciplines.¹ Historical research, for example, has been dealing extensively with actual human-animal relations, with animal metaphors and allegories, and with imaginings of animals and their characteristics in ancient, medieval, and early modern times for some time. This issue of *Interfaces* primarily deals with medieval Jewish and Christian texts featuring animals and human-animal contacts of many kinds, focusing on a limited but still large section of the vast field of ‘animals in the pre-modern era’ in order to present a number of different possibilities for interdisciplinary research on the subject.

Both Jews and Christians who wanted to live their lives according to God’s will in pre-modern times sought to be aware of what God wanted them to do, to know, and to believe. The two divine works in which God revealed his power and which could therefore be consulted in order to find out about his intentions were thought to be God’s creation (the so-called Book of Nature) and God’s word (the Bible). Jewish and Christian scholars thus had much in common in ancient, medieval, and early modern Europe: They shared the physical world in which they lived, while at the same time relying on the same religious reference text (*i.e.* the Hebrew Bible / the Old Testament) whenever they needed to make sense of what they could see, hear, and touch. In their eyes, the literal as well as the allegorical text had to be read and interpreted in the correct manner, disclosing as many layers of meaning as possible. Pre-modern scholars regarded every object in a broad sense, *i.e.*, every singular or repeated event, every person, city, landscape, thing, plant, or animal they encountered in the biblical text or in the empirical world as a poten-

tially important signifier of some hidden truth. By striving to draw plausible and meaningful connections between signifier and signified, they tried to unravel the secrets embedded in their textual and empirical worlds and thus to comprehend mankind's position within the whole of God's creation.

In this process, biblical and other textual representations of the world were often considered to take precedence over the extra-textual world. On the other hand, pre-modern scholars could not help but view the 'biblical world' through the lens of what they knew from other texts – e.g. biblical commentaries, bestiaries, the writings of the Greek and Latin natural historians – as well as from everyday observations. Sometimes, they needed to be ingenious in harmonizing the facts they read about in the Bible with what they knew from other sources or from their own experience. One famous example for difficulties of this kind are the Jewish and Christian discussions about an animal mentioned, among other places, in Psalm 103.18: "the rocks are a refuge for the *shafanim*" (סלעים מהסה לשפנים). What kind of creature does the Bible mean when it speaks about the *shafan*? Modern zoology uses the term 'rock hyrax' for this animal. Pre-modern scholars, however, did not agree on how to refer to it. The Septuagint calls it a hare, the Vulgate a porcupine (*chyrogryllius*), a hedgehog (*erinacius*), or a little hare (*lepusculus*), which led other translators to think of a rabbit or coney (Luther, King James Version). Notker of St. Gall calls the animal 'mouse of the mountain' (*mus montis*), which his pupil Ekkehart IV later transforms into a groundhog (Old High German *murmenti*), etc. (Müller 31–40). When speaking about the weakness and helplessness of the *shafan* hiding among the rocks (Proverbs 30.26), every translation provoked different interpretations of this biblical passage. Accordingly, different scholars learned slightly different lessons from the Bible. In turn, every interpretation affected the learned readers' and writers' attitudes towards the same animal in different kinds of texts, and perhaps also towards animals encountered in everyday life.

This issue of *Interfaces* explores the question of how Jewish and Christian authors in pre-modern Latin Europe thought and wrote about some of the animals mentioned in the Bible that they would either encounter in everyday life themselves or that they thought other people might. Medieval and early modern scholars regarded animals as excellent signifiers. In contrast to human biblical personages, animals were not perceived as individuals but rather as representatives of their respective species. Since every species constantly

regenerates itself, ‘the rock hyrax,’ ‘the wolf,’ or ‘the snake’ is virtually immortal and can be encountered again and again outside of the biblical text. In contrast to towns, geographical spaces, and inanimate things, the animal is alive and therefore possesses agency and even the capability to take decisions. Moreover, in contrast to plants, animals are free to move in space, making their interactions with human beings more complex.

Thinking about animals in the Middle Ages was basically a way of thinking about what it means to be human. Animals’ nature, animals’ actions and animals’ virtues or shortcomings were used as symbols and metaphors for describing human behavior, human desires, human abilities and disabilities, and positive or negative inclinations or traits of character. Animals were thought to be pious or idolatrous, insidious or benevolent, chaste or impure, just like human beings. They were considered to display human types of being and behavior in an especially pure, essential form. Thus, for example, comparing a man to a wolf produced a different idea of his character (wild, violent) than comparing him to a fox (smart, cunning). The European beast fables in the tradition of Aesop, but also mock epics like the Latin *Ysengrimus* and the medieval vernacular story cycles it inspired on Reynard the Fox (e.g., the French *Roman de Renart*, the German *Reinhard Fuchs*, or the Flemish *Van den vos Reynaerde*), in which animals exemplify social and moral norms, make use of such attributions, amplifying and distorting them to make their point (Bonafin; Henderson). Moreover, many animals seemingly embodied several different and even contradictory characteristics, as some bestiaries pointed out.² The ass, for example, was said to be a peace-loving, patient, and amicable creature. On the other hand, medieval scholars also described it as unchaste, lazy, and stubborn. Thus, when admonishing their readers and listeners to stick to the rules, medieval poets, theologians, historians, or philosophers could refer to different traits within the same animal or to the same trait in different animals when speaking about human nature and human behavior, choosing from a rich and elaborate set of anthropomorphizations.³

In order to reach a higher understanding of creation by systematically describing and interpreting the characteristics of animals mentioned in the Bible, pre-modern scholars developed a hermeneutics in which each animal is at the same time a thing in itself and a signifier representing something else, as the thirteenth-century German poet Freidank states in a piece of didactic poetry (*Freidank* 12.9–12, “Bescheidenheit”):

2. See, for example, Hassig, *The Mark of the Beast*; Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*; Kay; and Baxter.

3. See, for example, Crane; McCracken and Steel; Friedrich; and Klinger and Kraß.

Diu erde keiner slahte treit,
 daz gar sî âne bezeichnenheit.
 nehein geschephede ist sô frî,
 si'n bezeichne anderz, dan si sî.

The earth does not carry any species that is without the capacity to signify something else. No creature is so free that it can signify only itself.

In order to understand what any given creature signifies in a certain context, a Christian reader can observe it, as it were, through the lens of the four senses:

- the *sensus litteralis*
- the *sensus allegoricus*
- the *sensus moralis*
- the *sensus anagogicus*

A popular mnemonic explains how you should use the system of the four senses:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
 moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The literal sense teaches what has been done, the allegorical sense what you should believe, the moral sense what you should do, and the anagogic sense what you should strive for.

To name but one example: in the literal sense, the serpent signifies a snake. In the allegorical sense, it signifies the enemies of the Church. In the moral sense, the serpent represents humankind who can turn away from worldliness, just as the snake can shed its old skin. Finally, in the anagogic sense, the serpent signifies the Devil who will fight against God on the Day of Judgment. As the last example makes clear, the anagogical sense is not only what one should hope or strive for, but also a sense relating to eschatology. In practice, however, medieval scholars often did not apply all of the 'four senses' but only distinguished between a literal and a non-literal (spiritual) meaning.⁴ Rabbinic Judaism knew a comparable fourfold hermeneutic system. It is called PaRDeS (literally: 'orchard'), which is an acronym on the

4. The model of the 'four senses' was thus a way of systematizing different non-literal ways of reading and not understood as applicable everywhere. For the typological and allegorical tradition, see de Lubac; Ohly 1–23; and Wells 43–70.

four words representing the four approaches to a given text:

Peshat (פֶּשֶׁט): the literal meaning

Remez (רֵמֵז): the allegorical meaning

Derash (דֶּרַשׁ): the homiletic meaning

Sod (סוֹד): the esoteric or mystical meaning⁵

5. See Idel 87–100.

6. For interpretations of medieval Jewish animal iconography, see Epstein.

In short: Both Christian and Jewish medieval and early modern scholars wondered about how they could possibly delve into the deeper layers of meaning they assumed any textual or extra-textual animal to convey.⁶ Not surprisingly, they often had to deal with the fact that a specific animal was of interest to members of both religious communities. A comparison between Jewish and Christian ways of reading and interpreting biblical passages featuring animals demonstrates what the two hermeneutic traditions had in common, what separated them, and how they influenced each other, depending on the historical context in which the authors worked.

The papers in this special issue cover a wide range of animal species, such as the dove, the stag, the unicorn, the elephant, the crocodile, the lion, the hyena, the raven, the hare, and the dog as medieval and early modern authors and illuminators portrayed and interpreted them. Several themes come up in several different papers concerning different kinds of animals. It becomes obvious, for example, that both Jewish and Christian writers and artists sometimes drew on the Christian and Jewish tradition, respectively, when reflecting on the characteristics of a given animal, be it the lion or the dove. It might prove interesting to investigate under what circumstances they did this and whether that kind of cross-religious borrowing can be observed more often for some genres or topics than for others. Another theme that surfaces more than once is the pre-modern practice of deprecating the religious ‘other’ by comparing ‘the others’ to animals. Moreover, adherents of both faiths sometimes employed the same animal for this purpose, e.g. the dog, although destructive implications were certainly more dangerous for the religious minority than for the majority. Finally, quite a few animals are implicitly or explicitly associated with aberrant sexuality and obscenity. Chiding and condemning the hyena’s or the raven’s unchaste nature, their incapacity or unwillingness to conform to gender norms, and the unnatural acts they habitually perform was a way of discussing (by proxy) various aspects of human sexuality without leaving the safe ground of moral theology and natural philosophy and, more impor-

tantly, without having to approach the subject straight on.

This issue of *Interfaces* groups its papers in three sections. These sections deal with divine creatures, exotic creatures, and social creatures. However, as should be noted, almost every paper in one section touches upon the two other sections as well.

Divine Creatures

The first section contains those papers that focus on medieval discourses on animals as a means to discuss the relationship between mankind and God. The issue thus opens with Beatrice Trinca's paper on the medieval fascination for the inside of the human body and for the Christian mystics' desire to enter and participate in the body of Christ. To illustrate this desire, writers like Bernard of Clairvaux or Mechthild of Magdeburg likened the human soul to the dove and Christ's body to the rock, which, according to the *Song of Songs*, the dove enters through the clefts in its surface. Elke Koch centers her contribution on the stag in the Eustachius legend and its ability to signify both Christ and the Christian believer. The author shows how Christian medieval hagiographers adapted saints' legends by choosing from a wide array of existing texts and modes of presentation, thereby giving the animal at their work's center the role that best fitted their specific perspective on animals as mediators between God and mankind. Julia Weitbrecht, in turn, asks how late medieval authors and artists received the many different meanings that the unicorn had been carrying since ancient times. She analyzes in what ways they selected certain aspects from the material at their disposal and rearranged it in their own texts and images, thereby producing new perspectives on the connection between humankind's fall from grace and God's incarnation in the body of Christ.

Exotic Creatures

The papers in the second section deal with pre-modern ways of describing and picturing animals as a way of thinking about those parts of the natural world that were accessible only by reading about them, *i.e.* by approaching not physical but textual animals. In his paper, David Rotman explores how medieval writers depicted the marvelous, *i.e.* things, events or creatures that appear extraordinary but are be-

lieved to be existing within the natural order of things. He argues that in order to describe an elephant, for example, European Jewish authors resorted to spatial metaphors linked to Biblical landscapes and that they used Biblical words depicting similar phenomena. Similarly, as Johannes Traulsen shows, the medieval German translations of the *Vitaspatrum* relied, among other things, on their readers' and listeners' familiarity with the biblical creature Leviathan when depicting the otherwise unfamiliar crocodile. By presenting their audiences with an animal that evoked both the hardships of living in the wilderness and the dangers posed by evil incarnate, these texts created a powerful metaphor for monastic life. Another non-European animal that seems to have created a fair amount of fascination among European audiences is the lion. Oren Roman concentrates on biblical narratives about men fighting lions with their bare hands and on how these stories were elaborated on in Yiddish biblical poetry, drawing on Christian iconography and thereby not only expanding the repertoire of Yiddish literature, but also re-appropriating biblical heroes that had formerly been 'Christianized.'

Social Creatures

The third and last section of this issue assembles those contributions that deal with pre-modern art and literature using animals as a means to discuss commendable or reprehensible relationships among human beings. Andreas Kraß leads our attention to biblical and non-biblical discourses on the sexuality of the hyena, which ancient and medieval natural historians and theologians thought of as untrustworthy, sexually ambiguous, defying gender norms, prone to morbidity and acting on perverse impulses. They used the hyena as a daunting example in order to caution against homosexuality, idolatry or other kinds of 'abominable' behavior. Sara Offenberg's article on an illuminated thirteenth-century Hebrew prayer book asks how the Jewish patron who ordered the manuscript may have envisioned himself and his Christian neighbors in this work of art. She argues that several illuminations containing depictions of animals or human-animal hybrids contain both polemical and redemptive messages pointing to an anticipated shift in religious relations and to messianic salvation. In his contribution, Bernd Roling traces different and sometimes intermingling pre-modern Jewish and Christian traditions of explaining why the dove returned to Noah's ark while

the raven did not and what conclusions were drawn from the animals' behavior. While the writers generally considered the dove to be the perfect role model for the virtuous believer, they painted a more complex and often rather negative picture of the raven. Finally, Kenneth Stow opens up the scope of this special issue by extending the time frame from pre-modern discourses on animals to contemporary debates. His article reveals Christian anxieties about Jewish practices of ritual slaughter and the selling and eating of kosher meat from the early modern period to present-day discussions about the kosher and halal slaughter of animals. It connects the Christian preoccupation with a supposed Jewish kind of carnality with a long tradition of concerns about purity and impurity, human-animal relations and the often unstable relationship between Christians and Jews – and, today, also between Christians and Muslims.

In this sense, this special issue on biblical creatures could also be thought of as a challenge and an incentive (1) to further pursue pre-modern reflections on the relationship between animals and human beings in the light of recent insights gained by human-animal studies. (2) It might also be worthwhile to consider systematically the consequences that pre-modern discourses on animals still have for the way we perceive animals today. (3) This issue has been concentrating on animals in Jewish and Christian hermeneutic traditions, centering on pre-modern Latin (and Western) Europe; it would certainly broaden our horizons to experiment with an even stronger focus on comparative research – also including, for example, sources from Eastern Christendom and from the Muslim world and beyond.

Warm thanks go to the editors of *Interfaces*, especially to Lars Boje Mortensen and Paolo Borsa, for their generous help, and to the many anonymous reviewers of the submitted contributions, whose efforts, distinguished expertise, and selfless commitment have been essential in assessing the quality of the papers published in the journal and who have contributed to their quality by suggesting potential improvements.

Karel Appel's painting from 1951 – a product of the Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam movement CoBrA – invites us to see human and animal forms intertwined without secure reference points.

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