

Introduction



Introduction: Humanimal—The Bible and “Animal” Others

Animals pervade the Bible and biblical adjacent literature. Some are active, many are passive or instrumental, and even more are literary constructions, allegorical devices, and metaphors. A number of essays and volumes have been dedicated to biblical animals as they pertain to sacrificial and purity laws, or to how archaeological evidence of animals can help biblical scholars reconstruct history.¹ While these studies provide important contributions to the history and memory of the Bible and its contexts, they are often distinctly anthropocentric. Despite the normalization of reading ancient texts “such that the anthropocentrism seems inevitable and invisible rather than historically conditioned and actively ideological,” as Beth Berkowitz observes, scholars in a postmodern and posthumanist world must contend with animals as “characters in their own right.”²

Moreover, biblical scholars bear an additional burden to address “the animal question,” that is, to investigate the distinctions, similarities, and relationships between humans and animals, in light of the Bible’s “weighty anthropocentric

- 1 See select works such as Roy Pinney, *The Animals in the Bible: The Identity and Natural History of All the Animals Mentioned in the Bible* (Frontiers of Knowledge Series, Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Books, 1964); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966); Walter Houston, *Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law* (JSOT 140, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Billie Jean Collins (ed.) *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East* (Boston; Leiden: Brill, 2002).
- 2 In her introduction to *Animals and Animality in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Berkowitz provides an important summary of the field of critical animal studies, 8–15 (8).

inheritance.”³ This is not to say that we should put the Bible on trial. As Hannah Strømme notes, it is counterproductive to consider the Bible responsible for the sins against all animals since the its canonization. Instead, by critically engaging the biblical archive with interpretive openness, a more complex portrait of animal, human, and divine relationships emerges from its pages. While we may be accustomed to considering such relationships through binaries such as heaven/earth, good/evil, domestic/wild, and human/animal, such binaries do not reflect the multifaceted and multivocal writings of the Bible. Ken Stone argues in a similar vein that, “The literature and religion of the Hebrew Bible emerge from, and are made possible by, particular multispecies contexts.”⁴ For biblical interpretation then, a multispecies context invites—perhaps even necessitates—multidisciplinary approaches and methods.⁵

Over the last decade, what has been called the “animal turn” has made its way into biblical studies. This “turn” (which may include but is not limited to animal, critical animal, nonhuman, and/or posthumanist studies) is characterized by the attention that scholars give to nonhuman animals as subjects in their own right. Expanding on the work of influential animal psychologists, philosophers, cultural theorists, and literary critics,⁶ animal studies of the last two decades have continued to build on their predecessors’

3 Hannah M. Strømme, *Biblical Animality After Jacques Derrida* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018) 1, 10–17.

4 Ken Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 15.

5 For an introduction to and summary of these approaches for the study of the Hebrew Bible, see Phillip Sherman, “The Hebrew Bible and the ‘Animal Turn,’” in *Currents in Biblical Research* (2020) Vol. 19.1, 36–63. In ancient Judaism, see Beth Berkowitz, “Animal Studies and Ancient Judaism,” *Currents in Biblical Research* (2019) Vol. 18.1, 80–111. On the New Testament, see Laura Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Mark Bredin, *The Ecology of the New Testament: Creation, Re-Creation, and the Environment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2010); and the broader classical Levant, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006); and Patricia Cox Miller, *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

6 See, for example, Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009); *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013); Mel. Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012)

foundational works⁷ and further interrogate the human-animal boundary already problematized in earlier studies.⁸ Animal studies has continued on this multidisciplinary trajectory, incorporating queer, trans, decolonial, and other intersectional approaches. These added perspectives have proven invaluable in broadening the field beyond its initial (and continuing) ecological focus. As the lives of animals and marginalized humans are entangled, and the latter are frequently depicted as the former, such intersectional perspectives offer more than just hermeneutical value—they open up discourse for awareness, activism, and perhaps even change.⁹

This special issue identifies new frontiers in analysis of humans and other animals in biblical texts and adjacent literature and builds on the considerable advances over the last decades in animal studies. The essays were selected from over forty presentations given at a virtual conference, “Humanimal: The Bible and Animal Others,” that was held March 9–10, 2023. The presenters at the conference represented a blend of senior and early-career scholars, diverse gender identities, white and nonwhite perspectives, and textual foci (from the Hebrew Bible to early Christian and rabbinic texts). While the editors wish that many more presentations could have been included in this special issue, we hope that the essays selected are a testament to the breadth, depth, and diverse views and positions of the participants at the conference overall. We

7 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004); Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London; New York: Continuum, 1990); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008); *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

8 See the recent monograph by Peter Joshua Atkins that addresses from ANE and biblical perspectives the permeable boundaries between humans, animals, and deities. (*The Animalising Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4: Reading Across the Human-Animal Boundary* [London: T&T Clark, 2023]).

9 In his influential monograph in animal studies (*Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015]), Matthew Calarco draws on philosophy and ethics, and innovatively moves away from two previous approaches in the field: that of identity theorists (such as Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* [New York: Harper Collins, 1975]) and of difference theorists (such as Derrida). Calarco instead posits a notion called “indistinction,” which “aims to think about human beings and animals in deeply relational terms that permit new groupings and new differences to emerge, such that ‘the human’ is no longer the center or chief point of reference” (56). When this indistinction is taken seriously, Calarco shows how we can then see more clearly what Giorgio Agamben calls “the anthropological machine,” a system “that never included the entire human species” anyway (64). The movement away from an anthropocentric view then actually aims to include more humans than before and brings attention to the violence against humans and nonhumans alike.

editors were part of the conference organizing team, and we would like to thank the others in that group: David M. Carr, Sébastien Doane, Jake Evers, Brian Fiu Kolia, and Brian Tipton. Particular thanks go to David Carr, who made an invaluable contribution to the early stages of this special issue, including key insights in this introduction. We are also grateful to our external reviewers, as well as Colleen Conway for her assistance in organizing this special issue.

As far as the terminology used throughout this issue, the authors use variations of the terms “animal,” “nonhuman,” and “nonhuman animal” in their discussions. Historically, the category “animal” has been employed to include all creatures except for humans, an exceptionalism that obscures the biological reality of humanity’s participation as organisms in an organic world. Therefore, the designation “nonhuman animal” or the shorter “nonhuman” has attempted to remedy that exclusion and has proven to be useful in many situations. In other examples, however, like those that analyze how a societally constructed “human” slips into an “animal” world, there is no better word to use than “animal” which highlights these false distinctions. Furthermore, the title of this issue and the name of the conference it emerged from combines these terms in the neologism, “humanimal.” Here, humanimal refers to the intersection of human animal and nonhuman animal relationships, whether in metaphorical descriptions, similar treatment by oppressors, subservience to a deity, and a number of other examples. For this special issue, the editors have embraced a range of usages of each of the designations mentioned above, leaving the decision up to the authors’ discretion and acknowledging the rhetorical value of both old and new terminology.¹⁰

The issue is divided into three sections, which the following paragraphs will briefly summarize. The first three essays explore diverse differentiations between lifeforms amidst a humanimal, human and (nonhuman) animal matrix. The issue begins with an essay by Suzanna Millar which discusses the depictions of Goliath’s hybrid/cyborg human-animal body in 1 Samuel 17 and how these images portray his masculinity and ethnic identity as a foreigner. From sea monsters, lions, and bears, to dogs and more generalized prey, Millar navigates the complex oscillations of animalization that play a role in Goliath’s narrative. As she points out, while no actual animals appear in 1 Samuel 17, their imagery is employed extensively to genderize and ethnicize Goliath with the goal of his ultimate defeat.

¹⁰ For further discussion, see *Theorizing Animals: Rethinking Humanimal Relations*, eds. Nik Taylor and Tania Signal (Leiden: Brill, 2011), especially Peter Beatson’s essay “Mapping Human Animal Relations,” pp. 21–58.

In the issue's second essay, Alexandria Frisch analyzes the variety of humanimal bodies in the book of Daniel through the lens of Cary Wolfe's "species grid": animalized animal, humanized animal, animalized human, and humanized human. By seeing the characters in Daniel as operating on a continuum rather than simple binary, Frisch shows how depictions of sovereignty and power also hold the same nuance. Moreover, Frisch expands Wolfe's grid to include depictions of animalized divine and humanized divine figures, showing the transcendent, theological view of Daniel's apocalyptic author.

The first section concludes with Lily Carayannis's trans-queer-animal analysis of the shifts in gender of the great fish in Jonah 2. In contrast to everything Jonah represents—male, human, and rebellious to God's direction—the great fish is trans-queer, nonhuman, and piously obedient to God. The innovative reading presented by Carayannis upends the apparent "inconsistency" in the text and contributes a key insight to one of the most popularized nonhuman animals in biblical literature.

Part two presents two broadly focused essays examining categories used to organize human relationships with their nonhuman environs. David Carr opens the section with his survey of domestication ideologies across the Bible. He describes domestication as "an unequal interspecies power relationship oriented toward humans and their needs," which Genesis 1 epitomizes and also legitimizes based on the origin story of God's own domain. Moreover, Carr shows the implications of domestication on the Western world and how imaging God as the divine domesticator shapes ethics and relationships with humans and nonhumans alike.

The second essay in part two features Ken Stone's exploration of concepts of "the wild" by way of discussion of the she-bears in the 2 Kgs 2:23–24 story of Elisha. He frames his investigation within a subgenre of animal studies known as "extinction studies," and identifies the she-bears as Syrian brown bears which are now absent from the areas in which the biblical text envisions them. By redefining extinction as a gradual process rather than a moment when all of a species cease to exist, Stone calls the reader's attention to the climate changes, cultural attitudes, and remembrance stories of bears in the Bible that are imminently contributing to the loss of species today.

The third and final section presents two essays that explore new fields of inquiry and textual corpora for the Bible and animal studies. First, Naomi Reiss uses carceral logics to look at the depiction of imprisoned humans and nonhuman others in the Acts of Paul (and Thecla). She examines the abuses of nonhumans alongside humans in the Roman games and persuasively argues

that “dehumanization” is insufficient to describe the atrocities. Instead, Reiss proposes the term “de-animalization” and shows how the amphitheater both strips humans and nonhumans of their animality as living creatures, but can also form bonds in mutual captivity.

The final essay is Beth Berkowitz’s exploration of animal-kin relations in several biblical and early rabbinic texts. By looking at “animanimal” relationships—that is, how animals relate to one another—instead of imposing a humanist perspective, Berkowitz shows the value of letting animal families speak for themselves in both the “animal family laws” in the Bible and in the Mishnah. She blends reception studies, scientific studies, and source criticism in her analysis, demonstrating how much the concept of kinship has to offer the still-emerging field of animal studies and the Bible.

The issue concludes with a response to the essays by Brian Fiu Kolia. Writing from the islander frontline of the climate crisis, Kolia dialogues with each essay in an indigenous Pasifika practice called *talanoa*. *Talanoa*, as Kolia explains, is a convergence of “story, (story) telling, and conversation” in a communal setting. Relationality is central for *talanoa*, a dynamic which Kolia demonstrates in his delightful, insightful, and sobering reflections on each essay. Moreover, *talanoa* invites “alter-native” perspectives—both conscious and subconscious—and reimagines the role that animal studies has had (and will continue to have) in the emergence of a new way of doing biblical studies.

These essays discuss diverse creatures—bears, birds, bulls, dogs, fish, lions, livestock, and more. They also span textual corpora—Genesis, Pentateuchal laws, Samuel, Kings, Jonah, Daniel, Acts of Paul, and the Mishnah. We regret that no article addresses the canonical New Testament and hope that further work in this area is forthcoming. Equally, though the authors in this issue come from diverse demographics, we hope that non-Western perspectives will be increasingly heard in future publications. While each essay in this issue is distinct, there are also several themes that cut across them. Above, we summarized each essay in its own right; here, we draw them together according to thematic foci.

For example, several articles call out the anthropocentric tendencies of biblical scholarship, which often uncritically accepted animal imagery as simply a vehicle to convey a message about humans. Some essays focalize animals in and of themselves. Thus Carayannis describes a great fish with its own agency and will, and Berkowitz attends to the internal dynamics of animal families. Ken Stone concludes his contribution by listening to the groan of a bear—an animal voice whose lamentation should be taken seriously.

This focus on animals is essential. And yet we should not forget that the fates of nonhuman animals are often entangled with those of marginalized humans.

Carr suggests that the same ideology of domestication that has afflicted livestock has also contributed to the domination of other animal species, colonized peoples, women, and enslaved persons. Reiss observes carceral logics affecting incarcerated animals and imprisoned humans alike. Marginalized humans are particularly vulnerable when they are animalized. As Millar describes, dehumanizing the foreigner as a dog justifies excluding him from moral attention. Similarly, Frisch discusses the animalized Nebuchadnezzar, eating grass in the wilderness. As Reiss points out, though, this treatment is harmful because it denies people not just *human* characteristics but *animal* characteristics too—such as their physical and spiritual needs; it's not just dehumanization, but de-animalization. (De-) animalizing humans renders porous the human-animal boundary, such that the two slip together into the territory of the humanimal. Not only humans may cross this porous barrier, but also animals. Thus, Millar, Frisch, and Reiss all note humanized lions in their texts: Millar's lion in 1 Samuel 17 has human hands and beard; Frisch's lion-man of Daniel 7 rejects its carnivorous nature; and Reiss' Christian lion in the *Acts of Paul* is baptized.

What's more, these essays perforate not just the human-animal boundary, but the divine-animal boundary too; we meet not just the humanimal, but the divinimal. God is like an animal, interacts with animals, and treats humans like animals. Stone depicts a wild God akin to an ursine predator, who also directs the real bears under his dominion. Similarly, Carayannis' great fish and Reiss' baptized lion are faithful servants of the deity. For Carr, God is the great domesticator, with ultimate power over his creaturely flock, and equally, for Frisch, God has supreme sovereignty over all on earth. But while, for Carr, humans are to model God's powers of domestication, for Frisch, power differentials between humans and animals are flattened—all are impotent before the deity.

The concerns raised by the authors in this issue intersect with those of gender-critical decolonial, and ecological scholars. Concerning gender: Millar examines the construction of masculinity through animal imagery; Carayannis explores the trans-queer body of Jonah's fish; and Berkowitz celebrates the queer space of a Mishnaic bird's nest. Concerning decolonialism: Alexandria Frisch analyzes how a "species grid" interacts with imperial ideologies; Carr critiques ideologies of Western domesticating regimes, opening the door for stories from indigenous cultures; Kolia, in his response to the issue, offers a perspective from just such a culture. Concerning ecology: Stone tells the extinction stories of the Anthropocene, accelerated by human activity in recent times; Carr and Berkowitz urge more compassionate treatment of the species we have domesticated.

In sum, we as editors have aimed to curate a special issue that reflects the multidisciplinary field that animal studies has become, and to draw biblical studies further into that discussion. It is fitting to conclude with the enigmatic final words of the book of Jonah: “... and also much livestock” (4:11). While often assumed to be a minor afterthought—or at least an unclear and out of place phrase—the well-being of the nonhuman animals in Nineveh punctuate the conclusion to Jonah’s tale. For the Bible and animal studies, however, the conversation is only just beginning.

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