

ANIMALS AT THE MANGER

DONKEYS!

Donkeys were domesticated around the 3rd millennium BC (compared to sheep - 11,000 to 9,000 BCⁱ and cattle -10,000 BCⁱⁱ). This may have begun in Libya, but their use grew more strongly in the Nile Valley. Donkeys in the Bible were probably North African wild asses or Nubian wild asses. They ranged from white to gray to black and could have stipes or patterns. Some were as big as a thoroughbreds; others smaller than a Shetland pony.ⁱⁱⁱ

Donkeys are more sure-footed than horses and better at foraging in sparse growth so they were better suited to Israel, which is often arid and hilly. Most had at least one donkey to transport (usually women and children) or as pack animals. Donkeys predated camels in Israel so they were often used to journey across the desert. They could travel about 20 miles a day.^{iv}

Donkeys could power a grindstone and pull plows. In the Old Testament, there are laws that they are not to be yoked with other animals (who might be larger and move more quickly, perhaps harming the donkey). Other laws specify that lost donkeys and even enemy's donkeys must be helped and returned home. Their meat, however, was not to be eaten.^v

Donkeys are also famously featured in Zechariah 9:9 and in Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) as the animal that the king will ride on. While leaders rode horses into war, donkeys were animals of peace.^{vi}

1. When you think of donkeys, what Bible stories or Christmas carols do you think of?
 - a. Do not covet your neighbor's donkey (Ten commandments), Saul looking for lost donkeys (1 Samuel 9-10), donkeys know their master's crib (Isaiah 1:3), Jesus riding a donkey on Palm Sunday
 - b. "The Snow Lay on the Ground" ("the ass and oxen shared the roof with them"), "Good Christian Friends Rejoice" ("ox and ass before him bow and he is in the manger now"), "On this Day Earth Shall Ring" ("ox and ass beside him from the cold would hide him"), "What Child is This?" ("Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?")



Nubian wild asses (*Equus Africanus Africanus*) in Secadura, Spain, 2010. Photo by Nicolas Perez.



Somali wild ass (*Equus Africanus Somaliensis*). Photo by T. Voekler, 2008.

NUMBERS 22:22-35

BACKGROUND:

The people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness after God liberated them from slavery in Egypt. They were camping in the plains of Moab and Balak, a wicked king, saw how many Israelites there were and became angry and afraid. Balak called together messengers to send them to a man named Balaam. Now, Balaam was a seer and he was quite famous for being wise and powerful. Balak sent the messengers to hire Balaam, telling him to curse the Israelites so he could defeat them. After going back and forth a few times, Balaam ultimately decided to go with the messengers to work for King Balak.

²² God's anger was kindled because Balaam was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

²⁸ Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

²⁹ Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!"

³⁰ But the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?"

And he said, "No."

³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. ³² The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. ³³ The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live."

³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.”

³⁵ The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.” So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak.

1. How would you describe the angel that Balaam and his donkey met? Do you think this was one of the angels singing at Jesus’s birth?
2. In verse 22, the word for adversary is “*satan*,” the same word that Satan’s name comes from. It literally means one who opposes, accuses, or attacks.^{vii} When we sin, it is important for us to face holy opposition. How do we recognize when opposition is good for us and when to push through?
3. The donkey is a female donkey, sometimes thought to be calmer or more patient than male donkeys.^{viii} When traveling with a partner of another gender, how do we change course in a peaceful way?
4. Balaam’s name may mean “foreigner,” “mad people,” “corrupter of people,” or “his son is a beast.” He was a diviner, which meant that he could predict the future and not a sorcerer (one who worked to impact the future with a blessing or curse). Broadly speaking, the Bible is accepting of divination (finding out God’s will is the first step in carrying it out), but sorcery is regarded as a grave sin (it is not our place to subvert or try to subvert God’s will). Because sorcery tries to put humans in the place of God, it is seen as a form of idolatry.^{ix} Balaam is not one of the Hebrew people, but he knows about the God of Israel. Why do you think he agreed to work for Balak?
5. Why do you think God opens the donkey’s eyes to see the angel and not Balaam’s? What does it take for Balaam to finally pay attention?
6. What do you think the moral of this story is? What do we learn from this donkey?

LUKE 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”

¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

1. The woman has a, “spirit that had crippled her” in verse 11. Nowadays, we’re used to thinking of comprehensive diagnoses that have symptoms. Back then, they tended to focus on the symptoms themselves. So, this word literally means any illness or injury that weakens you or saps your strength. It would be something that interferes with your ability to enjoy or accomplish what you would like.^x Is Jesus drawn more to the weak than to the strong or are we all weak in our own way?
2. Diseases were often attributed to demons or evil spirits. If we step outside of our modern understanding of medicine, does it change how we understand Jesus’s healing ministry? Does it look less like science and more like spiritual power (i.e. Jesus’s strength overcoming all earthly weakness or frailty)?
3. The woman’s response to her healing is to immediately praise God, literally giving God glory.^{xi} The leader of the synagogue is upset that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. What is the purpose of the Sabbath? What are we supposed to do (and not do) on it? Is the woman better able to keep the Sabbath after she has been healed?
4. In verse 15, Jesus challenges the leader of the synagogue by reminding him that all of them tend to their ox or donkey on the Sabbath. How does tending livestock compare to what Jesus has done for the woman?
5. What do donkeys teach us about our faith given these two passages? How do they guide us to the manger?



Nativity by an unidentified Kenyan artist, perhaps early 21st century.

ⁱ <https://www.jyi.org/2012-february/2017/9/17/our-furry-friends-the-history-of-animal-domestication>

ⁱⁱ G.S. Cansdale, "Cattle," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 797-799.

ⁱⁱⁱ G.S. Cansdale, "Ass, Donkey," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 400-402.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} See <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7854.htm>

^{viii} See <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/860.htm>

^{ix} Milgrom, Jacob. 1990 "Balaam." In *Numbers*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, p.186-7, 471-2.

^x <https://biblehub.com/greek/769.htm>

^{xi} <https://biblehub.com/greek/1392.htm>