



Animal *Imagery*

in the New Testament

Cows grazing in Galilee in the area of Hippos. This area, which is located in the Golan Heights region, was known as Bashan in the Old Testament Era.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (4/12/99)

BY C. MACK ROARK

THROUGHOUT RECORDED history, people have used imagery from the animal kingdom to convey thoughts, teach lessons, give warnings, or provide examples of right and wrong in life. Animals were important to the story as early as Genesis and Homer; in Aesop fables, they were essential. In modern times, Thornton Burgess gave life lessons to a generation of children through the voices of farm animals. And who can forget C.S. Lewis's Aslan? Many of the wise adages in use today rely on animals for the point:

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
 The early bird gets the worm.
 That's a horse of a different color.
 Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.
 Let sleeping dogs lie.
 Like a fish out of water.
 And the list goes on.

In Luke 9:58, Jesus spoke of a fox and bird to show how difficult and potentially how desolate life may be for His true followers. A bird and fox each have a place, a home, in their natural habitat. Not so Jesus. He was laying down the challenge for the "wannabes" who had not counted the cost: can you face such a life?

The incident gives occasion to look into the animal world of Jesus' day. Which animals did people use for illustrative or exemplary purposes? What can we know about these animals? The following will attempt

Below: Two young boys tend to a herd of sheep at Tell Masos, thought to be Hormah. This region, about seven miles east of Beersheba, served as a major cross-road; the east/west route went to Beersheba and the north/south route led to Hebron.

Right: Interior of a columbarium (meaning "pigeon house") cave at Mareshah. The cave was built in the shape of a double cross; its 1,906 niches were used to raise pigeons for cultic purposes until the end of the 3rd century

B.C. During his reign (930-913 B.C.), Judah's King Rehoboam fortified Mareshah and stored food there (2 Chron. 11:5-11). In 587 B.C., however, the Edomites took over. Some people believe Mareshah was the home of Herod the Great.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL/ ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO (654707)

Left: Gold bracelet or armband in the form of a serpent; dated to the 3rd-2nd centuries B.C.

Right: Dated about 1450-1400 B.C., this scene shows birds flying away from a patch of papyrus, which is growing in the marsh of the Nile.

Right: Dated to about 480 B.C., this ceramic cup from Athens is in the shape of a donkey's head. The vessel has no foot, so a person had to hold the cup until all of the liquid was gone. Greek culture associated donkeys with Dionysus, their god of wine.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (4371163)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/8904)





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/23/14)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/ BOSTON (642417)

“In the ancient world wealth was more often measured by the number of animals one possessed than by the amount of land.”

to describe some of those cited most often or most significantly, how hearers would have regarded them, then look into the ways they were used.

A quick list of the animals of the New Testament yields as many as 220 mentions of more than a dozen different animals. Almost half of these mentions, approximately 100, are in the vivid imagery of the Book of Revelation. The following list gives the number of mentions¹ in the New Testament, omitting those in Revelation: sheep/lamb (43), bird (14), swine (12), serpent (9), dog (8), ox (8), wild beast² (7), donkey (6), camel (6), goat (3), fox (3), lion (3), horse (1). Numbers alone, of course, do not tell the whole story. Equally important is the context of each usage. Of this list swine, dogs, and goats carry a negative connotation. Others have both positive *and* negative portrayals, or are often neutral. Space allows us to discuss only four: sheep, bird, swine, and dog.

Sheep—The type of sheep native to Israel is the Awassi, found also in the countries surrounding Israel.³ The female can grow to 145 pounds and the male to 200 pounds, both yielding valuable wool. Interestingly, in the ancient world wealth was more often measured by the number of animals one possessed than by the

amount of land. Cattle were more valuable than sheep by a ratio of ten to one; goats were worth less. Yet in desert areas, which characterized much of ancient Israel, people raised more sheep, for cattle required hard-to-find grass. One could graze cattle only in the coastal plain and near consistent sources of water. Sheep, on the other hand, could go for weeks without water, and then might drink more than two gallons in a matter of seconds. Goats, which would forage on almost anything, could go two weeks without water, then drink as much as 40% of their body weight in minutes.

Thus both sheep and goats were more viable, if not more valuable, as livestock; they could travel farther, find food more easily, and last longer without water. Cattle, sheep, and goats were seldom a source of food as meat. Only rarely could the average family afford to slaughter an animal that otherwise provided food by way of milk products and wool for annual income. This prevalence and prominence of sheep, coupled with the many and varied metaphorical uses in the Old Testament, provided Jesus and the New Testament



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (18/22)

Left: White camel, seated beside the path that leads up Jebel Musa (Mount Sinai),

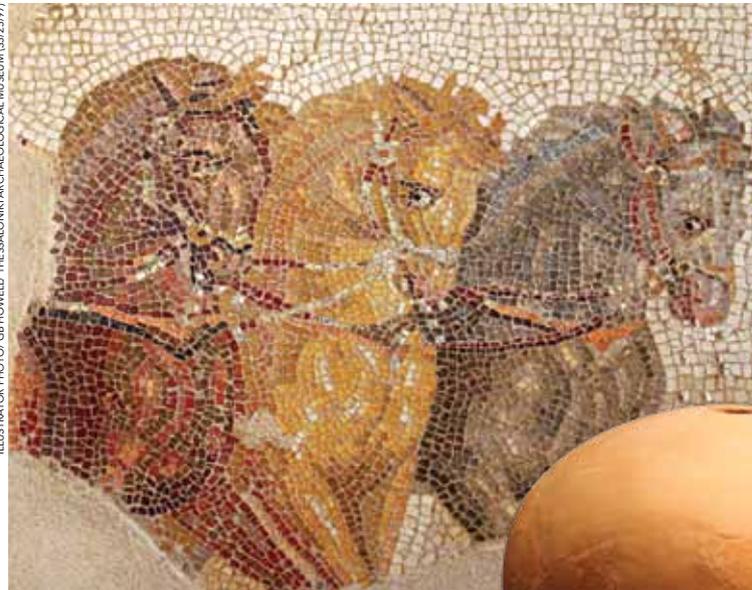
Below: The upper part of a mosaic that originally depicted four horses and a *synoris* (two-horse chariot) and its charioteer; from Thessalonica and dated to about 260–300 A.D.

Bottom right: From Asia Minor and dated to the Early Bronze Age (3150–2200 B.C.), a ceramic vase in the shape of a pig.

writers a rich, varied subject for metaphors in teachings. The unexpected concern for the lost sheep would have caught the ear of the Judean or Galilean listener (Matt. 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7). The shepherd leaving the 99 to retrieve a stray presented a picture of God that reversed conventional wisdom. That Jesus saw Himself as shepherd (John 10:1-18) would have resonated with the agrarian populace whose livelihood depended on the faithful work of the shepherd. And the eschatological separation of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46) would have made sense to even the casual listener, for he would have known the relative value of each.

Birds—The variety of birds in ancient Israel was great, as many as 350 species counting both migratory and native birds. The identification of these birds is difficult, for we cannot always make a specific connection between the Hebrew or Greek names used and our modern taxonomy. From the biblical perspective, however, the most important birds were the dove and pigeon. Raising these became a major industry in the Hellenistic period; hundreds of pigeon or dove coops with as many as 170,000 pigeon or dove holes have been found. Reasons for this proliferation are several, not the least being religion. The poor could use these birds as a substitute sacrifice (Lev. 5:7; Matt. 21:12). This produced a market driven by supply and demand at the temple and made for some a profitable enterprise (Matt. 21:12-13). In addition, these birds were valued as a source of food, plus, people used their dung as fertilizer. Arguing from the lesser to the greater, Jesus pointed to God’s care for the bird population to demonstrate the faithfulness of God’s provision for His disciples,

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ THESSALONIKI ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/25/97)



whose relative value far surpassed that of any bird (Matt. 6:26; Luke 12:6).

Swine—One of the principal animals in the food prohibition lists of the Old Testament was swine (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). They may have been considered unclean because they in fact were unclean, and hygiene was a concern. Wild pigs were a constant threat to crops; and because they were omnivorous, they could survive even in the desert and wilderness. They were scavengers wandering sometimes into occupied areas eating whatever they might find, making their way to what today would be called the city dump. This negative impression of pigs made them a ready illustration of the depravity of sin in the story of the prodigal

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ ATHENS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/2/93)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL / MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/ BOSTON (6/2/28)

Left: Lion-head detail decorates the cornice overlooking the courtyard between Bacchus and Jupiter Temples at Baalbek. Located about 45 miles north of Damascus in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, Baalbek has some of the world's

best-preserved Roman ruins.

Above: Terra-cotta statuette of a dog from a shrine to Guta, goddess of healing, in the city of Sin in ancient Persia; dated to about 2000–1800 B.C.

who found himself in a strange land, ready to eat at the pigs' trough (Luke 15:15-16). To cast demons into a herd of swine was altogether fitting (Matt. 8:30-32). No one would think of throwing pearls to pigs (7:6).

Dogs—Nor would people consider giving holy things to dogs, for like swine they were considered unclean. Never does Scripture picture dogs in a positive light. Although some evidence indicates that dogs were domesticated thousands of years before Christ, in the first century they were still primarily scavengers running in packs, eating what they could find where they could find it. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus came alive for the hearer, for he would have understood how dogs licking Lazarus's sores accentuated the beggar's misery (Luke 16:21). Paul was calling up this negative image of dogs when he warned the Philippians about those who would

undercut his ministry (Phil. 3:2). Second Peter has the most distasteful canine image: the apostate Christian is compared to a dog licking its own vomit (2 Pet. 2:22).

People living today, especially in metropolitan areas, can go weeks or longer without seeing a live animal. In the more-agrarian culture of the first century, though, this was not the case. Ever at hand, animals were their source of food, transportation, and clothing. And they often proved to be perfect examples for persons illustrating a point. **B**

1. Numbers given and totals may vary somewhat according to the text and translation used.

2. The Greek word *θηριον* (*therion*, wild animal) can refer to almost any animal, usually wild.

3. Data about the animals is taken largely from Edwin Firmage, "Zoology (Fauna)" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1109-67.

C. Mack Roark is Dickinson Professor of Bible, Oklahoma Baptist University, retired, Shawnee, Oklahoma.