

JANET E. SPITTLER

Animals  
in the Apocryphal Acts  
of the Apostles

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*  
247

---

**Mohr Siebeck**

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament · 2. Reihe

Herausgeber / Editor  
Jörg Frey (München)

Mitherausgeber / Associate Editors  
Friedrich Avemarie (Marburg)  
Judith Gundry-Volf (New Haven, CT)  
Hans-Josef Klauck (Chicago, IL)

247





Janet E. Spittler

# Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles

The Wild Kingdom of Early Christian Literature

Mohr Siebeck

*Janet E. Spittler*: born 1976; 2007 MA and PhD; since 2007 Assistant Professor of Early Christianity and Greek at Texas Christian University, TX, USA.

e-ISBN PDF 978-3-16-151590-3

ISBN 978-3-16-149731-5

ISSN 0340-9570 (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© 2008 by Mohr Siebeck Tübingen.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, in any form (beyond that permitted by copyright law) without the publisher's written permission. This applies particularly to reproductions, translations, microfilms and storage and processing in electronic systems.

The book was printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Held in Rottenburg.

Printed in Germany.

*For my parents*



## Preface

This study began on the fourth floor of Swift Hall at the University of Chicago during a seminar on the *Acts of Thomas* led by Hans-Josef Klauck in the Spring of 2002. I asked a silly question: what's the difference between an ass and a wild ass? Later that day, on a whim, I did a little research on what was known, or thought to be known, about wild asses in Greco-Roman antiquity. I was soon rewarded with some very detailed information about the wild and domestic varieties (both of which appear in the *Acts of Thomas*) and, what's more, with what I thought to be a very coherent answer to my next question: why is the wild ass so interested in asceticism? The immediate result was a decent term paper. But more importantly, I had stumbled upon an enormous and enormously interesting body of literature from the first centuries C.E. with which I was almost completely unfamiliar: a half dozen or so natural history texts, comprising thousands of surprisingly entertaining descriptions of all variety of animals; compendia of paradoxes; essays of Plutarch that I'd never read before; a dialogue of Philo that I'd never even heard of. The more I read, the more I noticed the same themes and anecdotes popping up in multiple texts across various genres. The authors of this "animal-related" literature were clearly in some sort of conversation with each other; when I returned to the other animals in the *Acts of Thomas* and then the (as I began to notice) quite numerous animals in the other apocryphal acts, it became clear that these texts, too, were part of the conversation. The long term result, then, of my silly question was a doctoral dissertation, accepted by the faculty of the department of New Testament and Early Christian Literature of the University of Chicago in August of 2007. The revised version is presented in the pages that follow.

I would like, first and foremost, to thank my co-advisors, Hans-Josef Klauck and Margaret M. Mitchell, who provided both challenging feedback and constant encouragement throughout the writing of the dissertation. I cannot imagine a better pair of advisors. I am grateful, too, to my readers, Elizabeth Asmis and David Martinez, for their valuable input and support. And I must thank Hans Dieter Betz, who – despite claiming to have retired the year I started graduate school – continued to teach seminars from which I benefited greatly and generously agreed to read and comment on almost every chapter in this book. I thank the editor of *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen*



zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, Dr. Jörg Frey, for including the book in this fine series, and also Ilse König, for her patient help in producing the final manuscript copy.

Much of the material presented here was first presented at the Early Christian Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago, and was much improved by the critiques and discussions that followed. I am therefore very grateful to all the students and faculty that have participated in the workshop over the years 2002–07, particularly Laurie Brink, Matt Calhoun, Brandon Cline, David DeMarco, Fanny Dolansky, Joel Dries, Tish Duncan, Gene Fojtik, Justin Howell, Annette Huizenga, Meira Kensky, Young-Ho Park, Trevor Thompson and Jay Weaver.

I am eternally grateful to my family, particularly my five siblings, Ricky, Al, Susan, Tommy, and Connie, whose confidence occasionally leads me to believe that I might be as competent as they seem to think I am. My mom and dad, Joan and Tom Spittler (to whom I dedicate this book), have simply been the best parents on earth – and pretty good proofreaders, too. Finally, I want to thank my favorite contemporary American poet, Keith Driver, for putting up with me all these years.

Texas, June 2008

Janet Elizabeth Spittler

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	VII
Abbreviations .....	XII
Chapter I: Introduction .....	1
A. The Scene.....	1
B. The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles.....	6
C. The Program.....	10
Chapter II: Animals in Graeco-Roman Thought .....	12
A. Natural History.....	12
B. The Philosophical Debate over Animal Rationality.....	15
C. Animals in Patristic Literature.....	26
D. Animals and Christian Asceticism .....	43
E. Conclusion .....	49
Chapter III: Animals in Ancient Prose Narrative.....	51
A. Introduction.....	51
B. Animal Anecdotes.....	55
C. Animal Episodes.....	65
D. Compositional Technique in the Apocryphal Acts.....	72
E. Conclusion .....	73
Chapter IV: Animals in the <i>Acts of Andrew</i> .....	76
A. Introduction .....	76
B. Animals in the <i>Liber de Miraculis</i> .....	81
C. Animals in the Martyrdom of Andrew .....	84
D. Animals in the <i>Acts of Andrew and Matthias</i> .....	89
E. The Eagle in the Armenian <i>Acts of Andrew</i> .....	91
F. The Exception That Proves the Rule.....	92

Chapter V: Animals in the <i>Acts of John</i> .....	94
A. Introduction.....	94
B. Bedbugs.....	96
C. The Snake That Stopped the Necrophiliac.....	110
D. The Partridge.....	116
E. Conclusions.....	124
Chapter VI: Animals in the <i>Acts of Peter</i> .....	126
A. Introduction.....	126
B. <i>Canis Loquens</i> .....	130
1. Talking Animals.....	133
2. Dogs.....	141
3. Simon Says ... Nothing.....	145
4. Borrowing from Peter to Pay Paul? .....	146
C. Tuna <i>Redivivus</i> .....	148
D. Conclusions: <i>respiens</i> .....	154
Chapter VII: Animals in the <i>Acts of Paul</i> .....	156
A. Introduction.....	156
B. Thecla: from Insect to Beast-fighter .....	162
Excursus: Man-eating Seals.....	181
C. Paul and the Baptized Lion.....	182
D. Conclusion: Multiple Lion Tales.....	187
Chapter VIII: Animals in the <i>Acts of Thomas</i> .....	190
A. Introduction.....	190
B. The Lovesick, Murderous Snake .....	193
C. Two Ass Tales.....	199
1. Ass, Wild Ass.....	209
2. Wild Asses in the Natural Historians.....	213
3. Body, Soul, Spirit.....	216
D. Conclusions.....	222
Chapter IX: Conclusion.....	224
Bibliography.....	233
Index of Ancient Sources.....	249
Index of Modern Authors.....	260
Index of Subjects.....	261

## Abbreviations

<i>Acts Andr. Matt.</i>	<i>Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals.</i>
<i>Actus Ver.</i>	<i>Actus Vercellenses.</i> This manuscript, containing the Latin <i>Acta Petri cum Simone</i> , is often referred to by scholars simply as the <i>Acts of Peter</i> .
<i>Hist. an.</i>	<i>Historia animalium.</i> Aristotle.
<i>Laudatio</i>	“Acta Andreae Apostoli cum laudatione contexta.” Edited by Maximilian Bonnet. <i>Analecta Bollandiana</i> 13 (1894): 309–52.
<i>Lib. de Mir.</i>	<i>Liber de Miraculis Beati Andreae apostoli (Epitome).</i>
<i>Narratio</i>	“Martyrium Sancti Apostoli Andreae.” Edited by Maximilian Bonnet. <i>Analecta Bollandiana</i> 13 (1894): 353–72.
<i>Nat.</i>	<i>Naturalis historia.</i> Pliny the Elder.
<i>Nat. an.</i>	<i>De natura animalium.</i> Aelian.
<i>NTApoc</i> <sup>5</sup>	<i>New Testament Apocrypha.</i> Edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher. Translated by R. McL. Wilson. 2 vols. Revised ed. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991–1992.
<i>Soll. an.</i>	<i>De sollertia animalium.</i> Plutarch.



## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### A. The Scene

The best preserved and perhaps most beautiful Roman mosaic found north of the Alps is the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century pavement of the villa at Nennig in Saarland on the river Mosel. Set within a geometric pattern are seven medallions depicting various scenes from the arena: a *secutor* (armed gladiator) fights a *retarius* (net-fighter), while a referee looks on; two *bestiarii* whip a bear that has overcome a third man; a tiger sinks its claws into a wild ass' back; two gladiators fight with clubs and whips; two musicians stand with their instruments, a water organ and curved horn; another *bestiarius* spears for the second time a leopard as it bites at the first spear lodged in its back; finally, an old man walks alongside a lion, his arm across the animal's shoulder.<sup>1</sup> Such images of men and animals were entirely common in the first centuries C.E. In the mosaics and paintings found throughout the Roman empire, animals are ubiquitous; some mosaics present a virtual field guide in tile, depicting dozens of different species of beasts, fish, and fowl. Especially favored are pastoral and aquatic landscapes, scenes from the hunt, and, as in the Nennig mosaic, scenes from the arena. These images are in turn sweetly idyllic and breathtakingly violent.

The particular grouping in the Nennig pavement strikes me as worthy of note. These seven scenes, all of which could indeed be witnessed in a single day at the amphitheater, offer an overlapping depiction of animal and human behavior. Truly, the arena was the place to go to see both animals acting like people (performing fantastic tricks and feats of skill) and people acting like animals (slaughtering one another with almost unimaginable brutality). It is above all this shared brutality that is laid out in tile at Nennig. The cruelty of animals is evident in the fierce expression of the tiger as it attacks the seemingly helpless ass and in the vividly rendered droplets of blood that spurt from the animal's wounded back; yet the leopard attempting to free itself from the spear is perhaps a more sympathetic creature than the gleeful, broadly smiling *bestiarius* standing over it. Similarly, it is unclear whether one is intended to pity the fallen man or the outnumbered and rather diminutive bear. The sav-

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this mosaic, see Reinhard Schindler, *Das römische Mosaik von Nennig* (Saarbrücken: Buchdruckerei und Verlag Karl Funk, 1960).

agery of the fight between the heavily armed *secutor* and the lightly clad *retarius* is hardly diminished by the presence of a rod-bearing referee. The gladiatorial battle is an unfair pairing of men of unequal stature; as Reinhard Schindler notes, it is a classic pitting of power and size against cunning and agility.<sup>2</sup> The image of musicians might be taken as a contrasting scene of tranquility, but the curved pipe and water organ are in fact the instruments of war and gladiatorial combat, used primarily to give battle signals. They are not to be confused with, for example, the lyre of Orpheus, which charms and tames humans and animals alike.

The only image of relative peace is the medallion depicting the old man and the lion. They walk with matching strides; there is no sign of collar and leash or any restraint other than the man's arm, casually draped over the lion's back. Although the presence of a bloody wild ass' head beneath the lion's left paw and a whip in the man's left hand remind the viewer that both of these creatures are potentially brutal, this medallion seems to be a depiction of friendship or, at the very least, a friendly working relationship. A downloaded printout of this old man and lion has hung above my writing desk since I began this project several years ago, in part because with just a little squinting the bald man becomes the apostle Paul, and the lion his executioner-turned-savior from the *Acts of Paul*. But only in returning to the image in the composition of this introduction does it occur to me that the lion is the only creature in the mosaic that looks directly at the viewer.<sup>3</sup> The gazes of every other man and animal are directed either at each other or off to the side, beyond their own scenes – at one of the other spectacles simultaneously taking place in the sand, the viewer might imagine. The lion's expression has been taken by some as ferocious, but it seems to me, if anything, rather sad. And there may be good reason for sadness: besides perhaps a friendship, the lion and old man likely also share the status of slave. The wretchedness of the king of the beasts forced into submission and servitude is only surpassed by the human being – pinnacle of all creation, by more than one ancient account – reduced to slavery.

What do these images say about the natures of human beings and animals? Here, they are presented as equally savage and yet equally vulnerable to attack and pitiable when overcome; nevertheless, they seem capable of surmounting both savagery and vulnerability in friendship – conspicuously, a

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>3</sup> One might contrast here Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, particularly in Foucault's interpretation. Foucault notes that the dog, lying on the floor in the foreground, is "the only element in the picture that is neither looking at anything nor moving, because it is not intended, with its deep reliefs and the light playing on its silky hair, to be anything but an object to be seen" (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [New York: Vintage, 1994], 14). Cf. Laura Hobgood-Oster's alternate interpretation in *Holy Dogs & Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 12–13.

friendship between man and animal. What is the spectator to make of such scenes, whether looking at these medallions or seeing the real thing at the arena? When animals act like human beings and men like animals, what difference is left between them?<sup>4</sup> What are the boundaries and/or connections? Put more anthropocentrically, where does the human being fit, if at all, among the other creatures of the natural world?

These questions were asked and variously answered throughout antiquity, but the conversation intensified in the late republican and imperial period. At this time there was, in the first place, a burgeoning of natural historical literature. Aristotle had centuries earlier produced a large body of work describing the characteristics and behavior of animals. A strong renewed interest, however, is found in the works of authors like Pliny the Elder (23–79 C.E.), Aelian (ca. 175–235 C.E.) and Oppian (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.), who produced long and detailed descriptions of animals, including numerous anecdotes of animals acting with apparent skill and cleverness, with care and affection for each other and for human beings, and even with awe and respect for the gods. The importing and display of an increasing variety of creatures at the animal shows in Rome and elsewhere undoubtedly provided both material and a more popular demand for such literature.

And while crowds packed the Coliseum and arenas across the empire to watch animals acting like people (that is, alternately with violence and apparent intelligence) the status of animals vis-à-vis human beings was being rather hotly debated by philosophers. Again, this is not a new topic in the history of Greek thought: an interest in the relationship between animals and human beings is evident as early as Hesiod.<sup>5</sup> A notable increase in interest from the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. has by some been attributed to a Pythagorean revival which, in its notions of reincarnation and call for vegetarianism, reopened questions of

---

<sup>4</sup> While I suggest here that in the arena the lines of separation between human and animal are blurred, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, in contrast, writes that, as opposed to the practice of animal sacrifice (where the mutual relationship of animals and humans is emphasized), through the pitting of man against animal “the arena served to brutalize and radicalize the divisions between humans and non-humans.” See *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36. Similarly, Jo-Ann Shelton writes that an element common to many beast spectacles in the ancient Mediterranean was “the desire to demonstrate the superiority of humans over the natural world” and “to celebrate the ability of humans to develop culture that separated and protected them from the menacing savagery and unpredictability of nature” (“Beastly Spectacles in the Ancient Mediterranean World,” in *A Cultural History of Animals in Antiquity* [ed. Linda Kalof; vol. 1 of *A Cultural History of Animals*, ed. Linda Kalof and Brigitte Resl; Oxford: Berg, 2007], 97). I would certainly agree that much of what went on in the arena was constructed to emphasize the separation of and antagonism between human and animal; this fact, however, makes it all the more striking that it is in these spectacles that the line between the two seems instead to disintegrate.

<sup>5</sup> See below, chapter II.



the connections and boundaries between man and beast.<sup>6</sup> Equally important may be the “rediscovery” and editing of Aristotle’s works at Rome in the first century B.C.E. and the circulation of an epitome of his *Historia animalium*.<sup>7</sup>

The primary issue disputed in later antiquity was whether or not animals are rational. The implications of this question varied among the different philosophical schools, but the Stoics set the terms of the debate, categorically and famously denying reason (λόγος) to animals. Sceptics and Neopythagoreans generally weighed in on the side of animal rationality, though with various motives. Although the strongest proponent of animal rationality, Plutarch, was a Middle Platonist, among Middle Platonists as a group there was no single “orthodox” position on the issue; rather, particular interests and emphases pushed individual philosophers in one direction or the other. Notably, the material collected by the natural historians provided the primary evidence for practically all of the arguments brought forward in the debate, with precisely the same anecdotes often being used by philosophers drawing opposite conclusions.

Descriptions of animal behavior and characteristics are quite common in the prose narratives of late antiquity. Authors like Achilles Tatius (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.), Heliodorus (3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.), Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120–190 C.E.) and Philostratus (ca. 170–247 C.E.) find numerous opportunities to relate anecdotes showcasing their knowledge of the natural world. In addition to anecdotal reports on the nature of animals, these and other late antique prose authors frequently write individual animals directly into their narratives, casting animals into prominent roles in key episodes.

Jewish and Christian writers, too, show an interest in the animal world. Philo (20 B.C.E.–50 C.E.), in fact, participates in the philosophical debate directly in his dialogue *De animalibus*. In the first half of this work (in the person of his nephew Alexander), he offers arguments *for* the rationality of animals. In the remainder of the text, however, Philo himself takes up Stoic arguments to affirm man’s dominion over the irrational animal kingdom (i.e. the man-animal relationship described in Gen. 1:26).<sup>8</sup> Among Christian authors, Origen (185–ca. 254 C.E.) provides the most extensive and direct response to the philosophical question, presenting, like Philo, largely Stoic arguments against the Middle Platonist view of his posthumously represented opponent

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilhus, 272, n. 1. On the source of the “revival” and the extent to which the interest in Pythagoreanism evident in Middle Platonism is a renewal or simply a continuation, see Christoph Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching and Influence* (trans. Steven Rendall; Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 123–4.

<sup>7</sup> See below, chapter II.

<sup>8</sup> Gen 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (NRSV).

Celsus (fl. 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.). Justin (100–165 C.E.), Tatian (d. ca. 185 C.E.) and Athenagoras (ca. 133–190 C.E.) make more passing reference to the question of animal rationality. For Tertullian (ca. 160–230 C.E.), the primary issue is the defense of creation as the work of the one highest God, as opposed to the flawed product of Marcion’s biblical demiurge. Elsewhere in patristic literature, for example the epistles of Clement and Barnabas, animals are considered primarily with reference to the Genesis creation narrative, the exegesis of which is often but by no means exclusively allegorical. Animals also make frequent appearances in early Christian narrative texts, including much of the ascetic literature of the desert fathers, in particular the *Vita Antonii* of Athanasius (ca. 296–373 C.E.). Although the asceticism (i.e. vegetarianism) of Pythagoreanism typically accompanied a high regard for the animal kingdom, in the literature of early Christian ascetics, it is the savagery of animals that is most often emphasized, with animals frequently representing the temptations and corruptions of humankind. The situation is similar in much of the “gnostic”<sup>9</sup> literature of Nag Hammadi, where animals often represent the evils of the natural world, being the creation, as for Marcion, not of God but of a wicked demiurge.

Animals loomed large in the visual backdrop of the Graeco-Roman world of the first centuries C.E. as perhaps the most popular subjects of the paintings and mosaics that decorated both private and public spaces.<sup>10</sup> As the preceding overview indicates, however, their presence is felt no less in the thought and literature of the time. As one scholar has suggested, “in the first centuries C.E., there was continuous cultural work to establish new categorical boundaries between humans and animals.”<sup>11</sup> This work was carried out by scientists, historians, literary authors, philosophers and theologians – Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians. In the course of the discussion, emphases shifted and party lines were crossed. The most basic issues, however, remained: what are the differences between animals and humans and where does the human being fit in the natural world?

---

<sup>9</sup> The use of this term will be discussed below, chapter II.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de Peintures Grecques et Romaines* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1922), passim, esp. 284–377; Harald Mielsch, *Griechische Tiergeschichten in der antiken Kunst* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2005); John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.–A.D. 315* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Gilhus, 36.

## B. The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles

Given the attention paid to animals in natural historical, philosophical and literary texts of the first three centuries C.E., as well as their frequent presence in the arenas (where Christians also made appearances), it is perhaps to be expected that animals are included in all five of the major apocryphal acts of the apostles, i.e., the *Acts of John*, *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of Paul*, and *Acts of Thomas*. But the prominence of animals, not just in anecdotes and metaphors but in actual speaking roles, is striking. Animals sometimes turn up where we might expect them (e.g. in the arena) doing things we might expect them to do (e.g. attempting to maul Christians), but perhaps even more frequently they are presented in quite unexpected ways doing extraordinary things: a snake falls in love with a beautiful woman and, in a fit of jealousy, kills her human lover (*Acts Thom.* 30–38); the colt of an ass approaches Thomas as he stands on a highway and speaks, asking Thomas to bless him by riding upon him, and calling Thomas a “fellow-initiate” and “fellow-worker” (*Acts Thom.* 39–41); a dog acquires a human voice and acts as go-between for Peter and Simon Magus (*Acts Pet.* 9–12); a bed full of bedbugs obeys the apostle John’s annoyed command, leaving his bed and waiting outside the door until morning (*Acts John* 60–61); a snake appears in a woman’s tomb and incapacitates a budding necrophiliac, curling up on his body and sleeping until John and company arrive (*Acts John* 71–86). Often, when Christians are condemned to fight the beasts they are, rather, rescued and protected by animals: Thecla, condemned to fight the beasts in Antioch, is defended by a lioness, who kills a bear and lion before dying from her wounds (*Acts Thecla* 33); Paul, condemned to fight the beasts in Ephesus, meets in the arena a lion whom he had baptized and had been, coincidentally, captured and condemned to death “even as you, Paul,” as the lion says (*Acts Paul* 7). Animals play significant roles in various fantastic occurrences, whether as objects of miracles (such as the salt-fish returned to life in *Acts Pet.* 13) or simply as animals doing ordinary animal things, but in accordance with some prophecy or act of divine will (such as the lion that kills the rude cup-bearer and the dog who retrieves his hand in *Acts Thom.* 8). They appear in self-contained episodes (such as the partridge that John takes pleasure in observing in *Acts John* alternate 60) and in dreams (as in that of Charisius in *Acts Thom.* 91).

Both the sheer number of animals appearing in the apocryphal acts (some thirty different species, by my count) and the often very significant roles they play demand further investigation. This has previously been done only to a limited extent, perhaps because of the tendency (evident in both early and more recent scholarship on the apocryphal acts) summarily to conclude that the animals in these texts are there primarily for their entertainment value,

adding to the fantastic nature and thus popular appeal of the texts.<sup>12</sup> To put it another way, if the major apocryphal acts have, as many have suggested, the dual purpose of entertaining and edifying, the animal episodes do the former, while other material – especially speeches and hymns – do the latter. But the fact that an episode entertains does not preclude it from having a broader significance. Quite the contrary: entertainment and edification (or education) often go hand-in-hand. We even have a new word for this in English: “edutainment,” the coining of which has been attributed to a producer of National Geographic documentaries, most of which are about animals and the natural world – a fact which is, I think, significant in relation to the present study.<sup>13</sup>

Of the scholarship that does exist, the baptized lion in the *Acts Paul* has received the most attention,<sup>14</sup> followed by the phenomenon of articulate animals in the *Acts Peter*, *Acts Paul*, and *Acts Thom.*;<sup>15</sup> beyond these topics, a handful of articles have treated individual episodes.<sup>16</sup> Robert Grant has provided an extremely helpful survey of animals in early Christianity, but the apocryphal acts were not his focus.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Ingvild Saelid Gilhus’ enormously help-

---

<sup>12</sup> Rosa Söder counts the presence of talking animals in the apocryphal acts as part of the “teratologische Element,” but goes no further in the analysis: “Im folgenden sei nun nur kurz auf das Teratologische an sich hingewiesen, ohne Rücksicht auf den Zweck, für den es verwendet wird” (*Die Apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1932; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969], 110). Schneemelcher, more recently, gives examples of “popular narratives” likely not the invention of the authors, three out of four of which are animal episodes (“Second and Third Century Acts of the Apostles,” in *NTApoc.*<sup>5</sup> 2:83).

<sup>13</sup> “Edutainment” has even made it into the OED; the first citation is from a 1983 issue of *Fortune* magazine.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Metzger, “Paul and the Baptized Lion,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 39 (1945): 11–21. This article provides an English translation of the Hamburg papyrus (i.e., the episode of Paul and the lion), but deals more with the nature of apocryphal vis-à-vis canonical literature than the particulars of this episode; H. J. W. Drijvers, “Der getaufte Löwe und die Theologie der Acta Pauli,” *Carl-Schmidt-Kolloquium an der Martin-Luther-Universität 1988* (ed. Peter Nagel; Halle: Abt. Wissenschaftspublizistik der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1990), 181–89; Wilhelm Schneemelcher, “Der getaufte Löwe in den Acta Pauli,” in *Mullus: Festschrift Theodor Klauser* (ed. Alfred Stuiber and Alfred Hermann; Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), 316–26.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Matthews, “Articulate Animals: A Multivalent Motif in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Harvard Divinity School Studies* (ed. Francois Bovon, Ann Graham Brock and Christopher Matthews; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 205–32; cf. Judith Perkins, “Animal Voices,” *Religion and Theology* 12 (2005): 385–96.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Horst Schneider, “Thekla und die Robben,” *Vigiliae christianae* 55 (2001): 45–57; Tamás Adamik, “The Serpent in the Acts of Thomas,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 115–24; idem, “The Baptized Lion in the Acts of Paul,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1996), 60–74.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Grant, *Early Christians and Animals* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

ful recent book, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas*, treats the apocryphal acts only briefly. There is, as of yet, no study of animals *in toto* as they appear throughout the five major acts.

This book attempts to fill this gap in our understanding of these texts by presenting a comprehensive analysis of animal-related passages. The thesis is threefold: first is the fundamental point that the animals in these texts are more than just amusing anecdotes, intended to entertain while other parts of the texts edify. I will demonstrate that the authors use animal episodes conspicuously, intentionally and really quite effectively to develop characters, to advance plot, and to make and illustrate philosophical and theological points. Second, I argue that a full understanding of the significance of animal episodes requires detailed comparison with contemporary animal-related literature. The abundance of comparative material includes Greek prose fiction, historiography, biography, fables, philosophical treatises and, most importantly, the natural history works that comprise animal-related anecdotes used as sources by so many authors in late antiquity. So, for example, for the modern reader to understand what a wild ass is doing in the *Acts Thom.*, it is crucial to find out what information about the wild ass was circulating in late antiquity – what, if anything, a third century reader might be expected to know about the animal, and how, if at all, it might have been encountered in other contemporary literature. Third, I argue that these animal episodes offer real insight into where the authors of these texts stood with respect to key philosophical and theological questions of the day. This study shows that, in their presentation of animals, the apocryphal acts are very much a part of the literary and philosophical scene described above. You don't have to squint much to see the bald old man in the mosaic at Nennig as the apostle Paul with his baptized lion.

In *The Body and Society*, Peter Brown, borrowing a turn of phrase from Claude Levi-Strauss, suggests that the authors of the apocryphal acts used women “to think with.” That is, to the extent that ancient men thought of women as being “less clearly defined and less securely bounded by the structures that held men in place in society,” “Christian men used women ‘to think with’ in order to verbalize their own nagging concern with the stance that the Church should take to the world.”<sup>18</sup> I tend to agree, but I think as clear a case can be made, doubling back to Levi-Strauss’ original reference, that these authors used *animals* “to think with,” not with respect to the Christian’s place in the social world, but to his place in the natural world.<sup>19</sup> Who and what the

---

<sup>18</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 153.

<sup>19</sup> Levi-Strauss’ famous statement that animals are chosen for totems not because they are “good to eat” but are “good to think with” (from *Le totémisme aujourd’hui* [Paris: Presses

human being, particularly the Christian, might be relative to the created world and other creatures – questions like these were at the front of their minds. Tracking the representation of animals in these texts allows us to discover how our authors were thinking about these things, and the various conclusions they wished to promote through their writings.

The resulting picture is not uniform; there is no consistent opinion on animals in particular or Nature more broadly expressed throughout the major apocryphal acts. A positive portrayal of animals is, however, common to four of the five. This is of particular interest in that one might expect the very rigorous asceticism or encratism espoused in these texts to result in a very negative depiction of animals, based either on a literal understanding of eating, drinking and procreating as animalistic activities, or on the metaphorical association of human passions and desires with internal beasts to be subdued. Indeed, much of the early Christian literature in which animals appear (as will be discussed below) begins with these notions and does present animals with thoroughly negative connotations. The apocryphal acts, in their prominent and often positive portrayal of animals, offer an untapped opportunity to flesh out and generally enrich our understanding of early Christian conceptions of the natural world and the Christian's place within it.

The task is not without contemporary significance. The question of humanity's place within the natural world is still open, and debates over the ways in which we as a species should interact with other species and our environment could not be more important. As others have persuasively argued, the very negative attitude towards animals that prevailed in early Christianity have been extremely influential over the last millennia and continue to influence how we act towards animals and the natural environment in general. Sorabji writes particularly clearly on the topic, concluding that “by and large, despite some opposing tendencies, my impression is that the emphasis of Western Christianity was on one half, the anti-animal half, of a much more wide-ranging and vigorous ancient Greek debate. And I think this helps to explain why until very recently we, or at least I myself, have been rather complacent about the treatment of animals.”<sup>20</sup> Without suggesting that a book on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian narratives will solve global warming, I would like to think that it, like Sorabji's work, might bring to light the diversity of ancient thought – in this instance, Christian thought – on animals, perhaps adding something to more contemporary conversations.

---

universitaires de France, 1962], 127–8) is often quoted in studies of animals in antiquity (see, e.g., Gilhus, p. 4 and Patricia Cox Miller, *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001], 15). It remains a very helpful concept for understanding the representation of animals in ancient thought and literature.

<sup>20</sup> Sorabji, 204–5.

### C. The Program

The following two chapters are dedicated to an analysis of the role of animals in the literature, philosophy and theology of antiquity. I will begin in chapter two with a brief overview of the natural historical literature of antiquity, particularly the first centuries C.E. The works of Pliny, Aelian, Oppian and others – each a collection of literally thousands of descriptive reports on animals – represent well the sort of sources drawn upon by other authors for information (both general accounts and particular stories) about the animal kingdom. These texts give the modern reader an excellent sense of what was known (or thought to be known) about animals in precisely the period in which the apocryphal acts were written. Next, I will outline the influential and enduring philosophical debate surrounding animal rationality. The literature of this debate, fascinating in its own right and remarkably current,<sup>21</sup> offers tremendous insight into how animals were conceptualized in late antiquity. I will then present an overview of animals in patristic literature, highlighting the various and overlapping currents in early Christian thought concerning animals, closing the chapter with a discussion of the role of animals in the literature of Christian asceticism.

In chapter three, I will discuss animal-related anecdotes and episodes in prose narrative roughly contemporary with the apocryphal acts of the apostles. Understanding the compositional techniques used by these authors is crucial for understanding how the authors of the acts were working with animals in their own narratives. The goal throughout chapters two and three is to establish a sense of both the literary world and the world of ideas in which the authors of the apocryphal acts are writing: what was known about animals? what sources were available? what were central themes and topics in thinking about animals? how did animals appear in the work of contemporary authors? to what narrative purposes were they put? The answers to these questions will provide a basis from which to interpret the individual episodes within the various acts.

The remaining chapters will proceed text by text, beginning with the *Acts And*. The decision to begin with *Acts And*. is not based on any presumption about chronology of composition; indeed, there is no true consensus as to which of the apocryphal acts is the earliest. I will begin with the *Acts And*., rather, because its depiction of animals differs starkly from the other acts. Whereas in the other four apocryphal acts animals are often (if not exclusively) presented positively, in the *Acts And*. animals, both real and in metaphor, represent only savagery and inhuman behavior. In this respect, the text

---

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

has much in common with some of the gnostic literature found at Nag Hamadi, including the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, and also such “orthodox” works as Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii*. The *Acts And.* is, to my mind, the exception that proves the rule. The fact that one of the five major apocryphal acts, so similar in so many other respects to the other four, is so different in its treatment of animals indicates that the use of animal episodes in these narratives cannot simply be reduced to a generic feature. Chapters five through eight, then, will consider the four remaining apocryphal acts in turn. Each will be analyzed independently, and individual conclusions will be drawn for each. In the concluding chapter, I will return to the broader landscape, indicating how the study of animals in the apocryphal acts both increases our understanding of where these texts fit within the thought and literature of their day and broadens our view of early Christian thinking on the natural world.



## Chapter II

# Animals in Graeco-Roman Thought

### A. Natural History

The first centuries C.E. saw a substantial growth of interest in natural historical literature. Many of these texts have roots in the empirical works of Aristotle and Theophrastus (whose  $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \zeta\acute{\omega}\omega\nu$  is lost), but other early sources (noted by Aristotle himself)<sup>1</sup> include the travel narratives and descriptions of foreign lands by authors like Herodotus and Ktesias as well as treatises on agriculture by Greek, Roman and even Punic<sup>2</sup> authors. The most important extant zoological texts include Aristotle's *Historia animalium* (especially books eight and nine), books eight through ten of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*, Aelian's *De natura animalium* and Oppian's *Cynegetica* and *Haliutica*.<sup>3</sup> The vast number of natural history texts available in the first centuries C.E. as well as their often complex literary dependence upon one another is evident in Pliny's work. In the dedicatory preface (to the emperor Titus) he names literally hundreds of authorities drawn upon for his own compendium, but notes also that in the process of collecting and comparing these sources he "discovered that the older authors were transcribed word for word, without acknowledgment, by the most reliable and contemporary authors" (Pliny, *Nat.* 1.22).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the great number of natural historical texts in circulation, a handful of texts that were used as sources by multiple authors in the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries C.E. can be identified. Particularly influential was an epitome of Aristotle's *Hist. an.* made by Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257–180 B.C.E.), used ex-

---

<sup>1</sup> Other sources mentioned by Aristotle include Aeschylus (633a19), Alcmaeon (492a14), Democritus (623a32), Diogenes of Apollonia (511b30), Herodorus of Herecleia (563a7), Musaeus (563a18), Polybus (512b12), Simonides of Ceos (542b7), Syennesis of Cyprus (511b23) and Homer (513b27, 519a18, 574b34, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> The agricultural treatise by the Carthaginian Mago was recognized as authoritative in late republican Rome (see, e.g., Cicero, *De or.* 1.249).

<sup>3</sup> The authorship of these two texts is problematic; see the discussion by A. W. Mair, *Oppian* (LCL, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), xiii–xxiii; cf. Sotera Fornaro, "Oppianos" *DNP* 8:1259–60.

<sup>4</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

tensively by Aelian and others.<sup>5</sup> While the epitome is not extant, quotations of it tend to suggest that a disproportionate amount of the material in books eight and nine – that is, the more narrative descriptions of animal behavior – survived the epitomizing. The works of King Juba II of Mauretania (c. 50 B.C.E.–23 C.E.) on Arabia, Africa, and Assyria were also significant sources, particularly for information regarding elephants. Leonidas of Byzantium (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.) seems to have been a source of ichthyological information; also quite important was Alexander of Myndos' ornithological handbook, which is frequently quoted by Athenaeus (in his *Deipnosophistae*), Oppian, and Aelian. Aelian also identifies and groups together material taken from several earlier sources, including Ktesias' *Indica* and *Persica*, Megasthenes' (c. 350–290 B.C.E.) *Indica*, and the writings of Amyntas, a *bematistes* of Alexander the Great who apparently recorded ethnographic and natural historical information about the king's travels through Asia. Whether Aelian, who lived and wrote in Rome with full access to libraries and other resources provided by the patronage of Julia Domna, knows these texts directly or only through previous compendia is difficult to determine. It has been argued by M. Wellman that the voluminous work of the first century C.E. lexicographer Pamphilus of Alexandria was his chief source;<sup>6</sup> Pamphilus, in turn, relied upon many authors, including Aristophanes of Byzantium, Artemidoros, and Didymos Chalkenteros,<sup>7</sup> author of yet another compendium incorporating yet another set of sources.

There was no single method of organization among the various natural history works; generally speaking, information and reports on a given animal are grouped together, the animals in turn being grouped roughly by type (e.g. land animals, from large to small) or, in some texts, by locality (e.g. animals of Egypt). The sort of information provided and the format of presentation varies

---

<sup>5</sup> On Aristophanes' epitome, see Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 171–209; W. J. Slater, *Aristophanis Byzantii fragmenta* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986); on Christian usage, see Grant, *Early Christians*, pp. 46, 73, 77. Aristotle's writings (which, according to Strabo, were left to Theophrastus and in turn to Neleus of Scepsis, in whose cellar they remained until purchased by a collector and brought to Athens in the 1st century B.C.E.) were brought to Rome when Athens was captured by Sulla in 86 B.C.E.; there, they were edited and organized by Andronicus of Rhodes. See Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle," OCD 165–69.

<sup>6</sup> Max Wellman and Rudolf Keydell authored a series of articles in *Hermes* attempting to parse out the sources behind Aelian's *Nat. an.*, including Sostratus, Alexander of Myndos, Juba and Pamphilus. See Max Wellman, "Sostratus, ein Beitrag zur Quellenanalyse des Aelian" and "Alexander von Myndos," *Hermes* 26 (1891): 321–350, 481–566; "Leonidas von Byzanz und Demostratos," *Hermes* 30 (1895): 161–176; Rudolf Keydell, "Oppians Gedicht von der Fischerei und Aelians Tiergeschichte," *Hermes* 72 (1937): 411–34; cf. Lorenz Grasberger, "Zur Kritik des Aelianos," *Jahrbuch für classische Philologie* 95 (1867): 185–193.

<sup>7</sup> This Didymos is perhaps identical with Arius Didymos, the first century B.C.E. Stoic philosopher and confidant of Augustus; see David T. Runia, "Arius," DNP 1:1156–1157.

significantly among the authors and even within individual texts. While, for example, Pliny's *Nat.* is more or less a cohesive account, in which Pliny's own voice is consistently present, Aelian's *Nat. an.* is more a compilation of largely disconnected entries. Nevertheless, both works include straightforward statements about animals, such as, "the elephant is the largest [of land animals] and the closest to humans in intelligence" (Pliny, *Nat.* 8.1) alongside anecdotes in which characteristics are illustrated, such as, "one of these animals, who was unusually slow in learning what he was taught, and having been frequently punished with blows, was found going over his lessons at night" (Pliny, *Nat.* 8.3). Observations, moreover, are not limited to the animals' characteristics or behavior: these texts abound with references to the animals' associations with various gods, their roles in myth and literature, and their roles in human society in general.

The natural history texts provided endless material for numerous authors and rhetoricians, particularly those engaged in the philosophical debate over animal rationality. While the chain of compendia dependent upon previous compendia is bewilderingly complex, it is clear that the vast majority of authors writing about animals, including, as we will see, thinkers on both sides of the animal rationality debate, were working from largely similar if not the same sources. And the natural historians themselves were clearly aware of the philosophical issues of the day. Aelian includes reference to the question of rationality in the prologue to his work on animals:

For the human has both been allotted speech (λόγος), the most valuable thing of all, and has been granted reason (λογισμός), which is most helpful and beneficial; and he also knows to fear and worship the gods. But that there should exist among the irrational animals (ἄλογα) by nature a certain virtue, and that they should have allotted to them many of the wondrous human excellences – this is a great thing indeed. (*Nat. an.* prologue)

Here Aelian approaches the basic Stoic position, i.e. that only man has external reason (i.e. speech), internal reason (λογισμός) and knowledge and reverence for the gods, but the statement is only lip-service: the work in fact provides hundreds of examples of animals displaying all of these qualities. Aelian, moreover, does not see his work as simply a resource for other scholars. He has made his tome accessible, writing in "plain speech" (ἡ συνήθης λέξις) (*Nat. an.* prologue), and has intentionally avoided the organization and classification of entries, choosing rather to "attract through the variety" of his material, weaving together his narrative "so as to resemble a meadow or a chaplet beautiful with its many colours, the many creatures, as it were, contributing their flowers" (*Nat. an.* epilogue).<sup>8</sup> This work is meant to be interesting and entertaining in itself – "edutainment," to use the new term – and

---

<sup>8</sup> Here, I've followed Scholfield's nice translation.

anyone who doesn't enjoy, Aelian suggests, can "give it to his father" (*Nat. an. prologue*).<sup>9</sup>

## B. The Philosophical Debate over Animal Rationality

The nature of animals vis-à-vis human beings was a topic of discussion and debate in Greek thought and literature from the earliest period, with Hesiod denying that any law of right exists among animals.<sup>10</sup> The topic never really lost interest. The variety of angles and issues involved (concerning, e.g., the nature of the soul, the ethical treatment of animals, vegetarianism/asceticism, animal sacrifice, etc.) gave occasion for treating the subject alongside a wide range of philosophical issues. The specific question of whether or not animals have reason came to the fore in Aristotle's extensive treatments of the animal kingdom; the full force of Aristotle's conclusions for moral philosophy and theories of justice would be felt in Stoic and, to a lesser extent, Epicurean philosophy.

As will be seen below, the Stoic sources give the impression that the issue of animal rationality was a philosophical line in the sand: to grant reason to animals was to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of human beings and their *summum bonum*.<sup>11</sup> However, this degree of clarity and inflexibility is not typical of ancient authors who address the subject; much more common is either a crossing of the line or waffling, making the summary and categorization of the views of the various schools a complicated task. John Dillon's comments on the diversity of opinions in Middle Platonism (on multiple issues) are instructive here. Arguing against the usefulness of terms like "orthodox" and "eclectic" in the characterization of later Platonists, he writes, "we must rather see things in terms of the pull of various attractions, Peripatetic, Stoic and Pythagorean, which produce various sets of attitudes within an overall

---

<sup>9</sup> Aelian apparently knows fathers like mine, whose always voracious reading (including multiple drafts of this book) has only broadened in scope and picked up in pace since his retirement.

<sup>10</sup> Hesiod, *Op.* lines 275ff.: "The son of Kronos made this law for men:/ that animals and fish and winged birds/ should eat each other, for they have no law (δίκη)/ But mankind has the law of Right from him,/ which is the better way" (trans. Wender). Note, however, that for Hesiod the distinction is not based on the capacities of human beings and animals, rational or otherwise; rather, justice is simply a gift from the gods. For a discussion of Hesiod's views on animals, see Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 43–45.

<sup>11</sup> See A. A. Long, "The Logical Basis of Stoic Ethics," in *Stoic Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 141–2; repr. from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1970/71), 93.