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The 'wonderful' donkey – Of real and fabled donkeys

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An ethological appreciation of the donkey has confirmed that it is a special and unique animal. The donkey is a well-adapted, sensitive, sociable, intelligent and notably loyal animal. Their so-called 'stubbornness' (dumbness) points rather to a species-specific intelligence to survive. Because of their domestication, they have been incorporated into the human world, mostly as pack, draught and riding animals. In the Ancient Near East (ANE) they sometimes also acted as 'divine agents', for example, in Balaam's fable (Numbers 22). An ecological hermeneutic focus on this fable has evoked sympathy for the donkey. Even if there is over-ascription because of the ANE mytho-poetical worldview, an authentic donkey can still be discovered behind this 'speaking' animal. Perhaps we need far more animal-centric fables instead of anthropocentric fables nowadays to appreciate the donkey as a remarkable animal.

Keywords: Donkey; Balaam's fable; Anthropocentrism; Donkey 'stubbornness'; Ethology; Ecological hermeneutics; Suspicion; Identification; Retrieval.

> Are donkeys intelligent? They are good at learning to survive and they are good at learning to avoid activities they find difficult, frightening or painful. They have good memories and learn very easily. Donkeys are good at being donkeys.
>
> (The Donkey Sanctuary, Sidmouth, Devon, UK)

Introduction

In this article, there is, as the title indicates, a two-pronged focus to highlight the 'wonderful'[1] donkey: firstly, an ethological (scientific) view to illustrate what a remarkable animal this is and, secondly, its utilisation as a divine agent in the well-known fable of Balaam and his donkey in Numbers 22:21–35. The purpose of juxtaposing of these two views is to enhance each other. Science can provide us with insightful views about the real nature of the donkey and a folktale can perhaps change our moral attitudes towards this animal.[2] The drawing in of animals into human thought is positive because it immediately acknowledges our connectedness to the natural world. Human symbolic activities like art and language have a shaping effect on human culture, notably when animals are depicted: '[*t*]he ways in which we paint, worship, and tell stories about animals also shape how we treat them in turn' (De Mello 2012:283). The 'ways' in which we do it is obviously very important, especially if we consider how animals are often popularly portrayed, nullifying their real nature: the wolf is depicted as 'bad'[3] in the story of *Red Riding Hood*, despite some scientists even ascribing 'morality' to them (Bekoff 2006), or the film *Jaws* depicting great white sharks as ultimate human killers that need to be exterminated. We often come across

1.'Wonderful' implies a few things: to counteract with modern ethology the folklore view (since ancient times and today) that this animal is 'stupid/stubborn' (e.g. Gn 49:14; Ex 23:5; Nm 22:23, 25, 27; Dt 22:4; Pr 26:3); the donkey's special relationship with humans through the ages has made this animal unique and indeed a wonderful, useful and valuable companion, and notably also on African soil – see Fernando and Starkey, online at https://www.animaltraction.com/StarkeyPapers/donkeys-fernando-socioeconomic.pdf – and lastly, to capture the miraculous 'speaking' of the donkey in the biblical fable of Numbers 22:21–35. There has lately been a disturbingly high demand for donkey skins from especially Eastern countries (e.g. China). The high concentration of gelatine in the skin is believed to have 'wondrous' medicinal value, similar to rhino horn. And shocking reports of the brutal slaughtering of high numbers of these animals have surfaced. This state of affairs inspired reflecting on the donkey in this article. Does this humble, intelligent and loyal animal really deserve this fate?

2.The focus of this article is specifically on the donkey fable of Numbers 22:21–35 and there is no looking further to donkey references in either biblical or extra-biblical material. The last-mentioned has been done incisively in the fine study of Way (2011). Way (2011:13) integrates both the archeological record and ancient Near Eastern texts, explicating the ceremonial (e.g. sacrifice, burial, treaty ratification and 'scapegoat' rituals) and symbolic (e.g. characterisation [loyalty, 'stubbornness'], association [divination], function [divine agent]) meanings that donkeys had for the ancients. Even though he states that his focus is ceremonial and symbolical and not zoological, he also has an appreciation for the naturalness of the donkey (Way 2011:62 n. 185, 185 n. 88, 197), complementing the ethological focus of this contribution. It is especially Way's highlighting of the symbolic, divinising function of donkeys in the ANE that illuminates Balaam's 'speaking donkey' (as an omen, Way 2011:66, 186) as not that strange.

3.De Mello (2012:296), however, emphasises cultural differences. When human identity is seen as mirroring a (macaque) monkey in Japan, it is certainly not shameful. In the racially heated South Africa nowadays, this would be regarded as derogatory. The race row that the clothing chain group, H&M, recently found themselves in, when a black toddler was called the 'coolest monkey in the jungle' in an advertisement for a jacket, is a telling example.

Note: The collection entitled 'Eben Scheffler Festschrift', sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).

children's books along the lines of how a donkey should overcome its 'negative stubbornness' to teach children this moral lesson,[4] while this is part and parcel of being a true donkey. This is not negative; this is our skewed interpretation of this kind of survival behaviour. This immediately also touches on the problem of anthropomorphising animals where they often become so human-like to teach some kind of moral or educational lesson to its human receiver[5] that the animal itself almost disappears. We learn much about humans but almost nothing of the (real) animal. More needs to be said on the personification or anthropomorphising of animals. Although it is anathema within scientific circles to anthropomorphise animals, this seems inevitable as we almost, by default, understand and interpret our world from our own humanness. Some argue that to personify can even illuminate science instead of fabricating it (Siegel 2005:199, 221) as will become clear in the ethological focus below. The kind of personification that is unacceptable is aptly called 'bambification' by the primatologist Frans de Waal, the sweet little big-eyed deer that thinks, feels and acts almost like a human and not like a real deer. De Waal (2001:71, 77) instead pleads for an animal-centric anthropomorphism. In the context of the donkey fable, it needs to be decided if and how far it complies with animal-centrism.

Analysing the donkey fable, the insights of ecological hermeneutics as exemplified in the new Earth Bible Commentary Series (see, e.g., Habel 2009, 2011:1–16; Rees 2015:1–5) will be utilised and built upon. This approach departs from the internalisation of an ecological (scientifically informed) worldview, where the habitat Earth is acknowledged as a fragile web of interconnected and interdependent life forms that evolved in cosmic space, requiring humans' respect and care for it as being intrinsically worthy, whilst being part of this life community. In order to determine whether a text is 'green' or 'grey', bio-centric or unbridled anthropocentric, a text is read with three value-shaping foci: suspicion, identification and retrieval (Habel 2009:38, 43, 51–64). These three foci echo the early feministic hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, taken over by eco-feminists to now appreciate an Earth consciousness instead of only a woman consciousness. The six principles of the earlier Earth Bible Series (Habel 2000:38–53) are conflated in these three foci.[6]

When reading a text suspiciously, attention is given to whether the text denies Earth and earthlings' intrinsic worth and purpose solely to enhance human interests. Identification means identifying empathetically with the Earth as a subject in her own right, experiencing our deep-seated bondedness or kinship with her and adopting a caring attitude through mutual custodianship or nurturing. Retrieval implies giving the Earth and its inhabitants a 'voice', either celebrative or resistant. Here it is imperative to determine whether the voice is only sentimental idealising as indicated above or an authentic 'natural' voice, even though presented in human language.[7] It is also interesting to note here the common ground among theologians, artists, poets and scientists, as the last-mentioned do not differ in their values and attitudes towards awe-inspiring nature.

The natural donkey

The history of the modern donkey dates back to approximately 60 million years ago. What lived then was a primeval horse-like creature with three back toes and four front toes, grazing on leaves in the forest. This animal gradually evolved to become, what we scientifically classify today, the *Equidae* family, consisting of the Grevy's zebra, the plains zebra, the mountain zebra, the African wild donkey, the Asian wild donkey, the kiang and the Przewalski's horse. All donkeys most probably came from their Asian forebears (Mongolian Dischiggetai, Gobi Dischiggetai, Khur, Kulan, Onager, Syrian wild donkey [extinct] and kiang genus), with African representatives such as the Atlas wild donkey (extinct), Nubian wild donkey and Somali wild donkey (Klotz 2015:28–29). In terms of behaviour, the donkey closely resembles the Grevy's zebra (Klingel 1977:329). Today, donkeys are found living and thriving not only in hospitable areas but also in harsh, demanding habitats, ranging from icy mountains to burning deserts, as they have become well adapted over time. Since they were domesticated about 6000 years ago, they can be found across the world, utilised for their meat, milk, hides; as pack, draught and riding animals; and more recently also as companion animals or pets (Goodwin 1999:4).[8]

Even though they are a family, 'donkeys are not just small horses with big ears' (Rippingale 2016:3). We all know the difference between the outward appearance of the bigger, attractive and majestic horse and its much smaller and not so attractive, long-eared cousin. In human culture, the horse has become the symbol of aristocracy, used in warfare because of its bravery, whilst the donkey is associated with the humble poor and serves mostly as a pack animal.[9] Apart from outward appearance, they also differ physiologically in terms of respiration (horse: 10 breaths/min; donkey: 20 breaths/min), temperature (horse: mean of 38 °C; donkey: mean of 37.1 °C) and pulse (horse: 32 beats/min; donkey: 41 beats/min) (Rippingale 2016:2). Boths are originally animals belonging to plains, where horses are grazers and donkeys graze and browse. Browsing allows donkeys to

4.For example, a 2015 children's book by Haddi, *Smokey the Stubborn Donkey*, has the aim to provide '… parents, teachers and counsellors with an entertaining way to teach children, why they should not be stubborn …', available online at https://www.amazon.com/Childrens-books-Smokey-Stubborn-collection/dp/1511611405.

5.Apart from usually conveying a moral lesson as De Mello (2012:307) indicates, a fable is also an extreme form of anthropomorphising an animal.

6.They also often overlap, the one evoking the other, almost as touching a spider web and the whole moves.

7.Human language provides a good example as we intuitively ascribe the same informational communication strategies to animals, whilst their body signalling and sounds most probably have more to do with manipulating the other party than conveying propositional information (Dawkins & Krebbs 1978:294).

8.In the ANE, donkeys were regarded as 'equidy' (valued for loading, bearing, hauling, transporting, breeding and threshing), '… a form of capital in the ancient Near Eastern world …', says Way (2011:99).

9.Note, however, that in the biblical world, the donkey often also served as a riding animal for high classes: 'The donkey is associated with *socio-economic status.* That is, the donkey serves as a mount for people of high standing – nobility/aristocracy … prophets … royalty … (1 Sm 25:20, 23, 42; 2 Sm 16:1–2; 19:26 [Mt 19:27]; Zch 9:9)', says Way (2011:100), but also adding that royalty sometimes preferred higher priced mules.

utilise habitats (e.g. mountains) which horses cannot do. A donkey (and its hybrid cousin, the mule)[10] needs a meagre diet compared to horses, and with its sure-footedness[11] in treacherous, impassable terrain, it actually has the advantage over the horse, as many military generals have experienced in the history of warfare (Way 2011:2 note 2). When it comes to behaviour or ethology,[12] the differences between these equids become even clearer.

Equids are social animals, living together in herds of differing sizes. Group-living is a survival strategy, where many eyes, ears and noses can detect danger compared to individual living. Horses and donkeys also do not have horns or antlers like other herbivores and therefore they are flight animals, taking flight rather than defending themselves (Goodwin 1999:3,5). They are also very visual animals, inspecting their surroundings constantly. But here the two, donkey and horse, already start to differ. A horse will immediately take flight once it senses danger, whilst a donkey will, interestingly, first investigate, and even come closer if it is unsure, to assess the probable danger. Because of their natural sociability and visual inclination,[13] Goodwin (1999:5) points out that stabling is somewhat questionable, depriving them from seeing each other and feeling safe in each other's company. Stabling testifies more of our anthropocentric human concerns (e.g. food, water, safety, warmth and 'privacy') rather than addressing the (natural) needs of the animal. The social structures of horses and donkeys also differ. Horses form larger herds with linear dominance (Proops, Burden & Osthaus 2012:337–342) and show hierarchical relationships[14] (with domination devolving from the stallion to the senior mares, younger mares and stallions and foals[15]); a stallion will defend his harem of mares, referred to as 'female defence polygyny'. Territories of horses often overlap and a stallion will tolerate other stallions as long as there is no interference with his mares, although mating with marginal stallions happens. Donkeys, however, usually living in much smaller bands, are known for 'territorial defence polygyny' (Proops et al. 2012:337). Stallions will defend their territories vehemently, and obviously will not allow other competing stallions in their territory, 'enclosing' their mares. A stallion wanting to mate will therefore not 'drive' the mare too far away for fear of leaving his territory (Klingel 1977:327).[16] The fact that donkeys are so strongly territorial makes them excellent guardians of livestock against predators (The Donkey Sanctuary 2018). Apart from the territorial males, there is no linear hierarchy amongst the rest of the group, which also explains the effective use of the 'humble' donkey for the more humble tasks of serving as pack, draught and riding animals. The sociality of equids is also group specific; horses prefer the company of other horses, and similarly donkeys and mules enjoy being with their own kind. Anecdotal evidence from donkey owners of dyadic donkey friendships (pair-bonds) has been empirically tested. Donkeys are able to recognise their favourite companion and will usually stay close to this 'friend' as often as they can. The companionship is not driven by the urge to dominate, to show aggression or of a sexual nature, but seems to be 'platonic'. It provides psychosocial benefits to both partners and long-term separation can lead to distress, the signs of which include vocalising, fence-pacing, dullness and inappetence (Murray, Byrne & D'Eath 2013:67–74).

Allogrooming amongst such friends is often seen and therefore it is advisable to scratch a donkey (imitating grooming) as a friendly gesture rather than pat it (The Donkey Sanctuary 2018). Perhaps, then a donkey is not this insensitive 'dumb' animal we popularly thought it to be.

Is a donkey intelligent? The Equidae in general are intelligent animals, although they differ amongst themselves. In a visual discrimination trial, the abilities of ponies (miniature horses), mules and donkeys were tested and compared. They had to identify food rewards in buckets that were accompanied by different visual patterns (no olfactory clues were given) and learn these patterns. With the final results, mules fared best, followed by the ponies and then the donkeys, confirming the anecdotal evidence of the cleverness of mules. 'Hybrid vigour' or heterosis explains the stronger expression of the parent traits through the hybrid. A mule outshines its parent horse in terms of cleverness, endurance and hardiness and has the same sure-footedness and reliability as the donkey parent (Proops et al. 2009:75–84). The fact that donkeys came last in this trial does not make donkeys stupid, as there are only nuanced differences. The Donkey Sanctuary (2018) claims that 'their rate of learning can certainly be as quick as a dog or a dolphin, both of which are considered to be extremely intelligent animals',[17] and they learn and master an activity quite quickly if it resembles their natural behaviour. Their environment also needs to be mentally stimulating or boredom, stress and aggressive behaviour might surface. It is probably the donkey's 'stoic'

10.Proops, Burden and Osthaus (2009:83) explain the two kinds of mules: mule – a cross between a donkey stallion and horse mare; hinny – a cross between a horse stallion and donkey mare. Both hybrids are sterile, and the hinnies do not show the same 'hybrid vigour' (enhancement of parental traits) as mules.

11.Probably because of its adaptation to mountainous areas also.

12.Goodwin (1999:4) remarks on wild and domestic behavior as follows: although behaviours differ, genes cannot change and therefore there are clear resemblances between wild and tamed equids.

13.Goodwin (1999:10) says that equids are '… visual communicators … extremely sensitive to subtle changes in the body language of their companions'. Way (2011:185 n. 88) confirms that equids have almost 360° vision, being equipped with the largest eyes among land mammals.

14.Klotz (2015:118) verbalises succinctly: 'horses have a different sense of duty and think in terms of hierarchies, in terms of leaders and subordinates. Hierarchical orders and a claim for leadership do not exist in donkeys' lives'. Goodwin (1999:6) makes an insightful remark: 'Despite the popular macho image of the stallion, family bands are generally led by mares, and studies have shown that both in feral and domestic horse groups, stallions were neither dominant nor the most aggressive animals in their herds'.

15.Goodwin (1999:9) notes that play is socially important and characteristic of mammals. Foals spend up to 75% of their kinetic energy in play, 'learning sets of rules' and in this way prepare themselves for adulthood.

16.The 'enclosed' mares will, in turn, defend their young.

17.Complementing donkey intelligence, Baragli et al. (2011:187–192) conducted an experiment on donkeys' short-term memory. Buckets, with food and without food, were presented to the donkeys and then hidden behind obstacles. Donkeys needed to memorise where to find the reward bucket, bypassing the obstacle. They seemed '… capable of correctly performing a task requiring short-term [working] memory with delays of at least 30 sec' (Baragli et al. 2011:192). And they obviously have good long-term memory as well, knowing where to find their food in the wild, and recognising their human companions after a long separation.

(Rippingale 2016:1)[18] appearance that misleads us to think it is dumb or dull. Its well-known 'stubbornness', usually interpreted as dumb, points directly to its contemplative ability, assessing what is good for it before acting in the appropriate way.

More needs to be documented on a donkey's so-called 'stubbornness', aptly illustrated by Balaam's (fabled) donkey in Numbers. Where does it come from? What we incorrectly perceive as 'stubbornness' is actually a survival mechanism that can be aptly understood in light of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Klotz 2015:26). At the basis of this pyramid of needs are the core ones: physiological needs (donkeys need air, food, rest and warmth; same with humans) and safety-related needs (protection from danger and safe sources to find food and water; in humans these needs are protection from danger, law and order, income and housing). Next follow social needs (life in a herd, sun or sand bathing, scratching, reproduction; in humans these are family, friends, reproduction, love or intimacy and good work atmosphere) and play (playing or pulling on stable equipment, biting at fences, opening zippers, turning over wheelbarrows; in humans it is social status, influence, recognition, success, and physical and mental strength that counts).[19] At the apex of the Maslow pyramid are self-actualisation (fulfilment of the self) and self-transcendence (reaching out to an unseen, greater reality) which only humans can experience and not animals. If a donkey's core need of safety, either through a predator or through the fear of something unknown is challenged, then 'stubbornness' steps in. This happens through the opposition reflex that Klotz (2015) explains as follows:

> The opposition reflex is an instinctive form of behaviour in flight animals which results in exactly the opposite of what the predator wants … It is a defensive reaction … kicking, snapping, running away, rearing, pushing and pulling back, stopping or folding the ears back. (p. 93)

Klotz (2015) continues:

> The donkey as a flight animal, equates narrow spaces[20] with obstacles that prevent him from escaping from the predator. Therefore, he generally refuses to enter them. (p. 93)

Science teaches us that donkeys are indeed wonderful, smart creatures, as donkeys in their own right and not the kind of creatures we as humans want them to be. What does the fable of Balaam and his donkey teach? Perhaps something valuable about donkeys also or only human interests?

The fabled donkey of Numbers 22

The fourth book of the Pentateuch called Numbers, in line with the LXX naming it *Arithmoi*, because of the census (and highly exaggerated numbers), does not attract that much attention amongst scholars (Rees 2015:1). This probably has to do with its contents, aptly encapsulated by its Hebrew name *bĕmiděbar*, 'in the wilderness', capturing the Israelites' journey from Sinai to the Promised Land (Canaan). Most readers know this story of continuous hardship, murmuring, complaining and unhappiness of the Israelites and how their leaders (Moses, Aaron and others) had their hands full to negotiate constantly with an (often) angry God to save them from devastation. As most books in the Hebrew Bible, the book has a long history of growth and older historical-critical commentators are fond of identifying and isolating the traditional sources (J, E, D and P) in the book, highlighting the profile of each specific source.[21] It came to its final form in post-exilic times with the hand of priestly authors also visible (e.g. first four chapters) in order to uplift and again give Israel a proud identity as before, whilst anchored in their one God[22] to stand their ground against the empires of Babylon and Mede (Rees 2015:10). The book, as it now stands, can be subdivided into three main sections: Chapters 1–10:10 (preparation at Sinai for the journey through the desert or wilderness), 10:11–22:1 (the journey itself) and 22:2–36:13 (on the plains of Moab ready to enter Canaan). The story of Balaam (22:21ff.) and his donkey forms part of this introductory third section.

Scholars agree that Chapters 22–24 are a later insertion in Numbers, without which the storyline of the surrounding chapters would continue uninterrupted (Budd 1984:256–257). However, a later redactor(s) artistically interwove this narrative segment as part of the whole, and as a self-contained unit it represents some of the more interesting and literary-poetic evocative sections of the book (Rees 2015:78; Wendland 2012:175 note 19). The story of Balaam and his donkey (Nm 22:21–35) adds further colour to these chapters.[23] The function of this short anecdote is clearly to mock Balaam.[24] The donkey ironically becomes the actual or better (prophet) 'seer' as compared to the so-called acclaimed 'seer' Balaam, or in the words of Levine (2000:154), '[*t*]he noted clairvoyant cannot

18. Rippingale (2016:1) remarks that donkeys can be in terrible pain without showing any signs of it.

19. Klotz (2015:36) indicates that donkeys spend most of their daily time on the core needs: eating 57%, resting or sleeping 23%, walking 16% and playing 4%.

20. 'Claustrophobia is one of the donkey's survival strategies', says Klotz (2015:93).

21. For example, Noth (1968). Budd (1984:264–265) exemplifies this focus: 'It would appear therefore that the tendency of the Yahwistic material is to heighten and emphasise elements inherent in the Elohistic base narrative. This supports the view that the Yahwistic material is the accretion rather than the reverse … The only priestly element in the whole section is the itinerary note in 22:1'. Budd concludes that Yahweh is in control, also of the pagan Balaam. Habel (2011:17–18), however, indicates that even though the isolation of sources might have been popular 40 years ago, the emphasis nowadays is strongly focused on the (final) text's ideologies and values. In the new Earth Bible Commentary Series, which Habel initiated, texts are decisively read from a 'green' perspective, to which my own contribution subscribes.

22. Yahweh's control is encompassing, even of foreigners, to serve his goals. Ashley (1993:436) says in this regard: 'Yahweh can draw non-Israelites in as tools to accomplish his purpose (so Melchizedek, Pharaoh, Rahab, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, etc.). God may confirm his will through the mouth of a pagan such as Balaam'.

23. There were probably more than one version of this folktale, and the one here in Numbers has been appreciated for its literary beauty. Levine (2000:155) calls it a 'picaresque tale' and Rees (2015:79) says it adds 'colour' to the rather uninteresting book of Numbers; Milgrom (1990:190) appreciates its artful construction as follows: 'The inner cohesion of this episode is revealed by its carefully constructed plot, which is built around three scenes in which the same actions reoccur: The angel stands in the way three times and is seen three times by the ass, which turns aside three times and is beaten three times by Balaam. The ass speaks only twice; in the third and climactic instance it is replaced by the angel, who reproves Balaam in its stead …'. Both Levine (2000:155) and Way (2011:26) indicate that this kind of story dates back to the pre-classical phase of biblical prophecy, and Way emphasises that '… the literary employment of animals as divine agents …' was familiar during this time.

24. Knierim and Coats (2005:260–262) describe the Balaam pericope (Chapters 22–24) as a legend. The embedded donkey fable (22:21–35), however, clearly and ironically subverts and mocks the so-called legendary 'seer' Balaam.

see what his jenny saw'.[25] And the donkey character interestingly contributes to the unfolding plot in the later oracles against Balak. It prefigures the way Balak will treat Balaam, as Balaam treated his donkey: 'Balaam becomes transformed into the [seeing or grasping] ass of the LORD; what an impact that must have on any attentive audience' (Wendland 2012:178).[26] The focus of this contribution is to determine if Balaam's donkey receives ecological acknowledgement in the book of Numbers. This book is overwhelmingly anthropocentric. Rees (2015:118–119) points out a dissatisfaction, discomfort and even disdain for the wilderness throughout the book. There is a near complete disregard for the non-human creation,[27] the wilderness is not the Israelites' home if compared to their previous Egyptian (temporary) home and their new home in waiting, Canaan the land of milk and honey. In his reading, however, he points out a few glimmers or moments of 'green' even in the barren desert with its own unique life forms (its soils, foods, animals, water), embedded in the 'grey' interests of the people travelling through it.[28] Might the donkey story capture such a brief moment of ecological awareness, of 'greenness'?

It will suffice to summarise Anthony Rees' reading of this story briefly by way of suspicion, identification and voice and add to his insights. Suspicion exposes anthropocentrism through the denial of Earth and its inhabitants of having intrinsic worth and ecological purpose. Rees (2015:81–82) first focuses on two remarks of the Moab king Balak, ironically the enemy of Israel but nevertheless acknowledging the ecological devastation by the hordes of Israelites on the Moab plains: '[*t*]his horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field' (Nm 22:4), and the insinuation of Israel being like a plague of locusts (although not specifically named as such): 'A people that has come out of Egypt *covers the face of the land*' (Nm 22:11; see Ex 10:5, 15). But even though ecologically sensitised, Balak obviously wants to secure nature's bounty for himself. Moving on to Balaam: he is presented as a diviner[29] whose words have power (through blessing or curse), even to the extent of changing the natural forces or course of events, and this should alert the reader how this 'little (human) god' (Rees 2015:82)[30] is going to treat his donkey.

Animals are believed to be inferior to humans, they have lesser worth and can be treated brutally by their owners, and this is exactly what Balaam does. His innocent donkey is hit three times,[31] for doing what donkeys naturally do, namely, being 'stubborn' because of assessing ('seeing') a dangerous situation and then acting appropriately (remember the opposition reflex). This is done, ironically, to protect its dumb master.

There is also a 'Steigerung' in the hitting – firstly, hitting the donkey by hand or a strap and then with his staff (Milgrom 1990:191). This 'little god's' crude anthropocentrism is emphasised with his 'flaming anger' (*wayyiḥar 'ap*; v. 27) similar to God's (v. 22; Ashley 1993:456),[32] in dominating and subduing this animal.

However, instead of invoking 'awe', Balaam paradoxically becomes almost 'beastly' in his treatment of his donkey (Milgrom 1990:469). And he would easily kill[33] it with a sword if it was in his hands (v. 29), confirming the internalised conviction of humans' mastery over the natural world. Despite the human megalomania, the hierarchically higher angel sides with the donkey (as the divine agent)[34] over and above the foolish, self-centred Balaam, acknowledging that she[35] actually saved him (Nm 22:33). The angel herewith ascribes her intrinsic worth. Objecting to human hubris, the Earth speaks through the donkey: 'In an unusual way, the donkey's speech[36] represents a literal (though literary) example of Earth raising her voice against injustice. Balaam's aggression to the donkey was unjust and the donkey responds … Earth has the capacity to open our eyes …' (Rees 2015:83).[37] Even if the donkey did not speak humanly (if we strip away this over-ascription of mytho-poetics),[38] her body language or behavioural 'speech' clearly 'speaks' of the wrong done to her. This suspicious focus certainly evokes empathy with the donkey and not with her human owner, which brings us to the next ecological hermeneutic focus, namely, identification.

Empathy or identification encapsulates the eco-just principles of interconnectedness and mutual custodianship between

25.Way (2011:61–62, 67) indicates a conspicuous resemblance of 'role reversal' between Numbers 22 and the Aramaic *Deir 'Alla Plaster Text* (dated 800 BCE), one amongst many in the ANE. The world is turned upside down where a weaker animal gets the upper hand over a stronger one, for example, a swallow reproaches an eagle. In Numbers 22, '… the assumed roles of Balaam and the beast of burden are reversed …' with the donkey (ironically) associated with divination. The last-mentioned also explains why Balaam is not surprised when the donkey speaks. Another biblical example of animals acting as divine agents is 1 Kings 13.

26.To his credit, Wendland (and most commentators) adheres to the timely plea of Person (2008:89) that non-human characters should be taken seriously in the development of a story plot. However, the donkey is not treated in its own right and stays dumb/stubborn (see the title of Wendland's contribution, 'Two Dumb Donkeys…'), as it is viewed anthropocentrically.

27.Rees (2015:12) describes the wars in the book as '… an exercise of consumption …' in the same vein as Habel (2009:16–22) describes God's interventions to save Israel as 'collateral damage' inflicted on nature.

28.Rees (2015:81) summarises: 'But throughout the narrative, one that is entirely concerned with human well-being, some interesting ecological features emerge'.

29.Milgrom (1990:472–473) points out that Balak wanted a sorcerer but got a diviner instead.

30.Sakenfeld (1995:125) describes Balaam as a 'spin doctor' who talks things right. It is almost as if Balaam imitates God in Genesis 1, '… let there be light and there was light …'

31.Between the lines one can also hear Balaam 'cursing' the donkey.

32.Way (2011:185) indicates a conspicuous *inclusio* between God's and Balaam's rage.

33.Rees (2015:83) indicates that the Hebrew verb *hrg* (v. 29) conveys a brutal death through torture and violence.

34.Way (2011:190) says the speaking donkey has become one of a kind with the angel, it '… shares a status [divine agent-HV] akin to that of the angel of Yahweh'.

35.Way (2011:162–170) distinguishes between *'ātôn* (female donkey/jenny), '*ayir* (male), *ḥămôr* (general term for donkey) and *pered* (male). Although the general use of the donkey as a pack and riding animal in the ANE would not really differentiate between the genders, Balaam's 'she' donkey might subtly contribute to the irony of the narrative: it is not only an animal that overshadows a human, it is also a female animal that beats this male ('little god') 'seer' to his own vocation.

36.Noth (1968:179) correctly indicates that within the ANE mytho-poetic worldview, it is not strange to find talking animals (see footnote 25). The only other talking animal in the Hebrew Bible is the snake in Genesis 3.

37.Gray (1965:333–334) points out that apologetic interpreters, even though over-ascribing animal perception (as supernatural) clairvoyance, at least acknowledge animals' natural capabilities exceeding those of humans by far.

38.This is in line with Van Dyk (2017:849) who prefers to speak of the ANE worldview as 'magico-mythical'. The momentarily suspension of a mythical worldview in order to appreciate nature in her own right has also been done by Viviers (2014).

the human and natural worlds. Identifying with the donkey means to try and 'put yourself in the donkey's hooves' so as to speak. Rees imaginatively pictures the seemingly idyllic lifestyle that the donkey had with her master before embarking on this journey to Moab. They lived near the Euphrates river in the city of Pethor and had a 'mutual beneficial relationship' (Rees 2015:84). She was provided with enough to eat and drink, and in turn willingly carried her well-known (and well-to-do) diviner-master to different destinations to practise his trade. When she was 'saddled' (Nm 22:21 *ḥbš*) again to fulfil her duty as the typical ANE pack and riding animal, *en route* to king Balak, she willingly and loyally (Way 2011:189) complied. But the tète-á- tète with the angel and the unjustified beatings severely damaged this closely bonded relationship, almost transforming Balaam into a predator. The partnership made earlier received a severe blow by this dominance, and it nicely acknowledges, even in this fabled story, the donkey's natural acceptance of partnerships or friendships instead of hierarchies (Klotz 2015:62). Surely, Balaam must have experienced the donkey's loyalty before this episode, but now he acts opposite. The (human) voice of non-understanding where the donkey asks a rhetorical question in verse 28, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?', aptly underscores this shock. Breaking her habit (v. 30) by being 'stubborn' three times was for a very good reason. This should have alerted Balaam that something was terribly wrong, but the seer is 'blind' to grasp it. The turning off the road into the field, the moving sideways against the stone wall and crushing Balaam's foot and the refusal to enter the narrow passage by lying down[39] tellingly capture the donkey's intelligence to avoid a predator or danger. Again this confirms the natural behaviour of donkeys pointed out above: that donkeys are almost 'claustrophobic' and avoid entering narrow spaces in order to escape an attack (Klotz 2015:93). In the story it is a supernatural danger (the angel [*malĕʾak*] of Yahweh) that is detected, evoking this stubbornness, but the 'opposition reflex' would not have been different if the danger was natural. Rees rightly criticises Sakenfeld's view of the donkey as '… the most stubborn and unintelligent, the most maligned of animals …',[40] opting for an intelligent animal that instinctively protects her owner. The donkey is not only smart but also trustworthy both in situations of danger and on the continuing journey towards Moab. Her presence is implied; she is not mentioned directly nor appears again further on, while she humbly fulfils her natural sense of duty. She disappears in the background while the human characters occupy centre stage, eagerly negotiating their best interests.

Even though having been up front ('green') for a moment, it becomes clear (somewhat disappointingly) as the rest of the Balaam story unfolds that she has only been a means to an end.[41]

Rees (2015) finally makes the Earth's voice of resistance against injustice referred to earlier, far more audible by letting the donkey speak as follows:

> I am Balaam's donkey. I have served him faithfully all my life. I follow his guidance, I carry his belongings, I carry him from time to time … I am useful to him, he is good to me and we live in a nice place … Recently we had a bad experience … I saw an angel three times! I was scared. I tried to help Balaam but he kept hitting me … Didn't he realize I was trying to protect him? And hadn't I seen something he hadn't seen? (p. 86)

Is this 'voicing' of Rees sweet, sentimental 'bambification', conveying all sorts of moralistic advice to humans? The answer is 'no'. It captures quite nicely and authentically what donkeys naturally do as we have come to know them through the earlier ethological focus on equids. But it still is a fable where miraculous things happen – an angel appearing and a donkey speaking. However, this is not strange in the mytho-poetic worldview of the ANE where these phenomena were part and parcel of the ancients' symbolic and lived 'worlds'.[42] Miraculous happenings like these are not that digestible in modern, scientifically informed thought where there is doubt that a spiritual world runs parallel to the natural world. If this is so, these over-ascriptions can be put aside and we still have a sensitive, intelligent animal (as a donkey) doing what donkeys are supposed to do. When they sense danger of some sort, they intuitively protect themselves and their companions. Interestingly, the donkey never gives (moralistic) advice about how Balaam should go about further with the Moabite king Balak as one would expect, often happening in fables. The only moral lesson being taught here is to be fair to donkeys.

The ethological focus earlier has raised our empathy for the special kind of animal that a donkey is. Does this particular fable do likewise, does it make one side with the donkey and all donkeys? In my view, it does.

Conclusion

The story of the donkey offered to us through science is an attractive one, and wins over our respect for this remarkable animal, of being a donkey in its own right. We cannot escape anthropomorphising even when doing science, but the animal-sensitive profile of the ethological focus has presented us with a well-adapted, sensitive, sociable, intelligent and remarkable loyal animal. No wonder this animal has, since its domestication, become an important part of the human world.

39.Crouching is not a natural behaviour, but it is understandable as the poor animal is forced by her owner. Within the 'story world' of the fable, Levine (2000:156) seems correct about 'prostration' (*rbṣ*), where the donkey anticipates Balaam's falling to the ground face down in reverence before the angel. If a donkey can 'speak', it can also 'revere'. See also Rees (2015:80).

40.Rees (2015:85) refers here to the description of the donkey by Sakenfeld (1995:126). Sakenfeld, however, adds 'in post-biblical Western view', but the folklore conviction of the dumb donkey is also present here. See also Ashley (1993:432) who speaks in the same vein of a '… dumb and stubborn beast of burden'. See again the title of Wendland's article, 'Two Dumb Donkeys' (2012).

41.Way (2011:187) summarises: 'The jenny merely serves as the vehicle (both literally and figuratively) that reinforces this message to Balaam … His mission is to speak YHWH's words only'.

42.See footnote 25.

Throughout the ages the donkey has been incorporated into human culture, notably also of the ANE. Way (2011) encapsulates why the donkey acquired such a unique and special place in the biblical world:

> [… *T*]he donkey had a special relationship with humanity that sets it apart from the other domesticated animals. The donkey served in ceremonial rites (like ovids, caprids, and bovids)[43] … in agricultural work (like bovids), also … as a pack and riding animal (like camelids). These broad and variegated functions … in the pastoral/nomadic environment of early Israel, were … significant factors in establishing the symbiotic partnership between humans and donkeys. … (p. 203)

It is understandable that this special animal would also have been allowed to become a 'divine agent' in the Balaam fable.

The fable of Balaam and his donkey, appreciated especially through the lens of ecological hermeneutics, in my view does not fare that badly in evoking our empathy for the donkey. This is perhaps so, because we have much of the naturalness of donkey behaviour retained in the fable. It is not of the 'bambification' kind.

The miraculous 'speaking' animal is also not strange within the ANE worldview, but putting this aside for a moment we still have an authentic animal. Unfortunately, the 'grey' anthropocentric book of Numbers left this momentarily 'green' appearance of the donkey behind, as the narrator (and his readers) forgot about her altogether. Perhaps we need new fables nowadays, far more animal-centric, to save the donkey.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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43.Way (2011:176–183) provides an interesting example of the donkey's worth and uniqueness. Even though an unclean animal (Lv 11:2–7; Dt 14:4–8), it was nevertheless included in the list of the redemption of firstborn animals (Ex 13:13, 34:20), probably because of its economic value, age-old bond with humanity and former (including foreign) sacrificial status. Elsewhere, Way (2011:151) indicates that the donkey often outshone the potent bull in sacrificial rites.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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