

“Who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth, and makes us wiser than the birds of the heaven” (Job 35:11)

by

Tova Forti

Abstract:

This study focuses upon animal images in two ‘Wisdom Books’ of the Bible, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as a unique prism in discerning the viewpoint of the author. Our method of research combines zoological, literary and conceptual aspects as the three main dimensions in analyzing the formal and ideational setting of animal images. The examination of the syntactical and thematic setting of animal images within the literary pericopes clarifies their conceptual linkage to the ideational framework of each book.

The teaching of the Book of Proverbs turns to the individual, urging him to assimilate behavioral values that will aid his integration into the social order. Comparing fauna imagery as ‘simile’ to its appropriate application as ‘similitude’ mirrors the teacher’s acute observation of human conduct in life and the educational demands made of the individual. Different aspects of animal behavior such as diligence and efficiency are recalled to exemplify desirable models for human conduct. Another rhetoric device in Proverbs offers a paradigm of confrontation between animal figures and human behaviors. The juxtaposition of human and fauna functions as a metaphor for negative models of behavior.

The third rhetorical device of animal imagery employs figurative illustration in a dialectical debate found within two aphorisms in the Book of Ecclesiastes (9:4-5; 10:1). The Book of Ecclesiastes offers a reflective framework that uses dialectical discourses in order to urge the reader to face the author’s contradictory statements concerning life. Within the dialectical discourse, the animal simile sketches polarity by the use of contradictory language and values that are seen as equal forces in the cognitive process of selecting the right way.

King Solomon is linked to literary traditions of wisdom and poetry. He is depicted as the *Ur*-patron of natural science and composer of proverbs: “He uttered three thousand proverbs and his songs were a thousand and five. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall, and he spoke of beasts and of birds and of creeping things and of fish. Men of all peoples came to hear Solomon’s wisdom” (1 Kgs 5:12-14).¹ Such encyclopedic knowledge by which phenomena of plant and animal are divided into categories is evaluated as a special *Gattung* of wisdom in the Bible.² Scholars have estimated Solomon’s encyclopedic knowledge as dependent upon foreign onomastic traditions that were produced in the royal court circles of Babylonia and Egypt.³ This assumption needs more investigation as regard to the direct influence of Babylonian culture and literature on the life and

thought at the royal courts of Israel during Solomon’s epoch. Furthermore, it can be shown that the canonized traditions of wisdom literature of the Old Testament, especially the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes contain elaborate codifications of natural data within didactic instructions or reflective debates. Collections of proverbs and admonitions embed empiric observations of animal’s behavior as well as illustrations of zoological characteristics as examples reinforcing various teachings about human behavior. Or vice versa, descriptions of beasts of burden, domesticated animals and wild animals within the sermons of God’s answer to Job in chapters 38-39 are not simply encyclopedic lists but rather theosophical argumentation of human’s ignorance to perceive the works of God.

This study focuses upon three kinds of rhetoric paradigms by which the attitude of the wisdom teacher towards animals is manifested.

My discussion starts by offering two kinds of rhetoric paradigms within the Book of Proverbs, in which the attitude of the wisdom teacher towards animals is manifested. About 40 times various names of animals are mentioned within the book. These animals can be divided into four categories:

1. Winged creatures: bird, sparrow, swallow, eagle and raven.
 2. Insects and reptiles: ant, locust, snake (viper) and lizard.
 3. Wild animals and predators: bear, lion, swine, deer, dog and rock badger.
 4. Domesticated animals: ox, billy-goat, ass and horse.
- The first attitude of the teacher evaluates animal characteristics as imitative models for human conduct. The second one puts forward paradoxical juxtaposition of animal behavior and human types as a dynamic illustration of negative elements in society.

I shall attempt to describe briefly the ideational framework of the book of Proverbs: This book concerns practical wisdom, which offers guidance so as to master life

successfully. The teachings are formulated as proverbs or instructions that turn to the individual, urging him to assimilate behavioral values that will aid his integration into the social order. The Book of Proverbs lacks any link to historical events or even to national or ideological setting. "It never had a role in the ritual life of Israel and makes no pretense to an origin in divine revelation or inspiration".⁴

A. Animal Imagery as Imitative Models

Different aspects of animal behavior are recalled to exemplify desirable models for human conduct. For example: "Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, she having no officer, official and ruler, provides her food in summer, gathers her provision in harvest-time. How long, O sluggard, will you lie there, when will you rise from your sleep?" (6:6-9)

The Ant, which is not mentioned in any other part of the Bible, appears twice in Proverbs, once within an admonition structure, calling upon the lazy type to go to the ant and observe her manners, and a second time within the stylistic feature of the 'Numerical Saying' pattern, which will be dealt later. In both, the wise-teacher brings forth the industrious insect and its efficient manners as imitative models of behavior.⁵

The human is called upon to adopt certain characteristics in his personal conduct of life and as ideal models of human social organization. It seems that basic zoological data such as the highly organized life and division of work by the wingless female workers, the winged queen and winged males were unknown to the ancient writer. Instead he employs social terminology borrowed from hierarchical grades of military and civil rank as a motive clause for his assumption that ants are not bound to any authority and yet they manage to conduct an organized and productive life. The adaptation of fauna stereotypes to didactic aims of human conduct is gained throughout the interaction of two different semantic fields: habits of animals and human social vocabulary. The industrious insect is described by using descriptive components similar to those of the diligent son elsewhere in Proverbs: "He who gathers crops in summer is a wise man; He who sleeps through the harvest is a disgraceful son" (10:5 and also 20:4). The ant's trait of storing is evaluated only in the Book of Proverbs as a polemic against the laziness of the dormant son during agricultural seasons.⁶ Admiration for the ant is once more expressed in a rhetoric pattern of the "Numerical Saying".⁷ This stylistic feature unifies a number of examples from the animal realm under a common articulation of praise: "Four are among the smallest creatures on earth, yet they are the wisest of the wise: Ants a people not strong, yet they prepare their food in summer. The badger is a folk without strength, yet it makes its home in the rock. The locusts have no king, yet they march forth in formation. The lizard, one may be grasped in the hands, yet it is found in royal places" (30:24-28).

Minute creatures, such as ants, badgers, locusts and lizards, are considered to display some of the wisest modes of behavior in spite their lack of physical strength. Is this proverb simply covering a bit of natural history fixing upon one aspect of order of nature? It seems that the four creatures are described as if they were human beings, and the author is mainly oriented towards their intelligence to survive: The ant is storing food in the summer foreseeing hard times. The badger (*Procavia capensis*) finds protection in the rocks (cf. Psalms 104:18) where it makes its nest and conceals its young.⁸ The locust is described by military terminology offering minimal natural history: "The locust has no king, but they march in perfect formation" (30:27).⁹

The author evaluates the locust's efficiency by negative analogy to human society ruled by a king. The descriptive terms of the ant and the locust sound more like a critical remark on kingship and military authorities than an empirical observation.

When dealing with zoological characteristics and the animal's identification, we should consider the literary perception of the animal in its various occurrences in the Bible. In the description of the locust plague in Egypt and throughout prophetic literature, the damage caused by invasion of swarms of locust upon man's crops is likened to the menace of God's punishment.¹⁰ The major aspects of locusts within the Bible and non-biblical sources are its large numbers and destructiveness whereas in Proverbs the quality of efficient organization is conveyed and no hint is given of its destructive qualities.¹¹

B. Paradoxical Juxtaposition of Animal Imagery and Social Categories

This rhetoric device offers a paradigm of confrontation between animal figures and human behaviors. The juxtaposition of human and fauna functions as a metaphor for negative models of behavior.

1. *Bear and fool*

In the first example we encounter a bear and a fool: "Rather meet a bereaved she-bear, than a fool in his folly" (Prov 17:12). The phenomenon of a female bear robbed of her cubs is a natural occurrence and it was often employed as a simile linked with emotions of bitterness and despair. The idiomatic expression 'bereaved she-bear' appears twice more in the Bible, once within historiography in the story of the revolt of Absalom: "and Hushai said, you know that your father and his men are courageous fighters, and they are as desperate as a bear robbed of her whelps in the field" (2 Sam 17:8), and once again within prophetic literature in the Book of Hosea: "I will encounter them as a bear robbed of her cubs" (13:8).

In our case the teacher revives the hackneyed idiom by varying its application in content and form. The she-bear is juxtaposed to a fool in his folly as a human

referent within a 'better than' proverb, "Rather meet a bereaved she-bear than a fool in his folly". The variation of the usual analogous pattern (cf. Prov 15:17; 17:1) and the replacement of the usual association evoke surprise. Emotions of fear and despair are substituted by sentiments of mockery and sarcasm due to the peculiar disjunction of a bear and a fool. The didactic message of disassociation from fools is mentioned elsewhere, for example: "He who accompanies wise man becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm" (Prov 13:20 and cf. 14:7; 23:9; 26:4). But here it sounds more vivid and is dressed up by a more picturesque image.

2. Dog and fool

The second example offers another disgraceful encounter with a fool in his folly but here in reference to dog's habit: "As a dog which returns to its vomit, so is a fool who repeats his folly" (Prov 26:11). The dog's habit of returning to its vomit or turns and digests it, is chosen as a figurative illustration of humiliating behavior.

'Vomit' contrasts with digestible food, and in Wisdom literature it functions as the antithesis to mental assimilation: "The morsel you eat you will vomit; you will waste your pleasant words, do not speak to a fool, for he will disdain your sensible words" (Prov 23:8-9). This figurative saying of the dog who turns to eat his already digested meal directs its scorn at the simpleton who repeats again and again, as if in perpetual motion, his foolish attitude, not being capable of assimilating any teaching.

The dog is mentioned within various derogatory contexts such as the frequent idiomatic expression of self-abasement and insult formulas: "But how can your servant, who is a mere dog, perform such a mighty deed (2 Kgs 8:13)".¹² Pulling out the most unfavorable characteristic of the most abject animal as simile *vis à vis* similitude, confers upon the fool a most humiliated status.

3. Dog and the hot-tempered type

The third image also involves a dog. Here the dog implies an irresponsible and dangerous action on the part of a provoker: "A man who takes hold of the ears of a dog, a passerby who gets heated over a quarrel not his own" (26:17). The Hebrew text reading *mit>abēr*, infuriate oneself, is varied by the rendering of the Syrian and Latin translations, *mit>āreb*, embroiled reflecting metathesis. In spite of the textual variation, both versions express a warning against getting involved in unnecessary quarrels.

It is worthwhile to mention that throughout the Bible the dog is usually linked with menace and danger (cf. Ps 22:17,21; 57:7; 68:24) and only once appears the construct compound "flock dogs" (Job 30:1) representing the domestic dog (cf. Matt 15:27; Tob 11:4). Here the encounter between man and animal is described in a bi-cola proverb, which opens by presenting an enigmatic

situation: Why should anybody take hold of a dog's ears (or 'tail' according to the Septuagint reading)? The solution is proposed in the second cola that functions as an explanatory clause: a passerby who insinuates himself into a quarrel not his own. The figurative topic of a wild dog concretizes the entangled and dangerous situation by which the 'hot tempered' type brought disaster upon himself.¹³

4. Lion and sluggard

Another animal configuration referring to negative elements in human society is found in two direct speech expressions, with slight variations, both of which are related to the sluggard: "A sluggard says: There is a lion outside, I shall be slain in the street" (22:13), and the second one: "A sluggard says: There is a cub on the road, a lion in the midst of the streets" (26:13). The explicit declaration of being threatened or assaulted by a lion stated by a sluggard evokes incredibility. The audience is conscious of the common perception regarding the lazy fellow who always finds pretenses to avoid effort and exertion, in this case, even pulling lions out of his stock of excuses. The hyperbolic description of the slouch who is determined to stay at home, or better in bed is frequently conveyed by the wise-teacher, for example: "The door turns on its hinge, and the lazy man on his bed" (26:14).

C. Animal Imagery within Figurative Illustrations in Ecclesiastes

Finally we turn to a third rhetorical device of animal imagery that employs figurative illustration in a dialectical debate within two aphorisms found in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Ecclesiastes offers a reflective framework that use dialectical discourses in order to urge the reader to face the author's contradictory statements concerning life. Within the dialectical discourse, the animal simile sketches polarity by the use of contradictory language and values that are seen as equal forces in the cognitive process of selecting the right way.

1. A dead fly contaminates aromatic perfume

The ideational setting of the following aphorism: "A dead fly spoils a [chalice] of precious perfumery's ointment" (Eccl 10:1) between two other wisdom sayings reinforces them as a proverbial metaphor. The following sayings offer a conceptual solution to the parable of the dead fly as similitude: a. "One offender can destroy much of value" (9:18b) and b. "A little folly outweighs wisdom"(10:1b). These proverbial clauses provide an analogous statement to the dead fly parable declaring wisdom's limits and its vulnerability similar to the delicate essence of aromatic perfume. Both - wisdom and perfume suffer damage at the hands of a lesser being considered a fool, a dead fly. The author of Ecclesiastes

uses contradictory terms, such as: 'to ferment' or 'turn rancid' in contrast to 'perfumed ointment'; 'precious' in contrast to 'little' and 'wisdom' in contrast to 'folly', all of which provide the setting for his dialectical discourse by offering man the possibility to choose the right way.

2. *A live dog is better than a dead lion*

The second saying, in which dog and lion are involved, reflects a debate raising the question: "For who is reckoned among the living and has something to look forward to? Even a live dog is better than a dead lion, since the living know they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more recompense, for even the memory of them has died" (9:4-5). The juxtaposition between two animals, a dog - qualified as a symbol of contempt and humiliation- and a lion - known as the 'king of beasts' - (Gen 49:9), is shaped as a paradigm of a 'Better proverb', "a live dog is better than a dead lion", and expresses the author's ambivalent attitude toward life. Choosing the "living dog" serves as a concretizing device for the idea that there is profit in being alive, however ironic the sentiment may seem.

Summing up, the present study has pointed out how animal images in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes serve as a unique prism in discerning the viewpoint of the wise teacher. Zoological, literary and conceptual aspects were considered as the three main dimensions in analyzing animal images in the Wisdom compositions. Our investigation examined the syntactical and thematic setting of animal imagery within the literary pericopes and clarified their conceptual linkage to the thematic framework of each book. This combined perspective enabled us to evaluate the rhetorical aspects of Wisdom teaching through animal imagery.

The literary discussion examines the dynamic hermeneutics between the animal images and their formal setting within literary models. Comparing fauna imagery as 'simile' to its appropriate application as 'similitude' mirrors the teacher's acute observation of human conduct in life and the educational demands made of the individual.

Man's observation of his environment inspires and enriches his figurative language. The literary expression of his empirical experience becomes an integral part of the author's, as well as the listener-reader's cultural legacy.

Tova Forti

The Department of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel

tforti@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

¹Scott 1976, 84 -101.

²Alt 1976, 102-112 called this type of wisdom *Naturweisheit*.

³Alt, op. cit; see also Fox 1986, 302- 310.

⁴Fox 2000, 7.

⁵Extra-biblical material offers three main types of ant similes: vast numbers, worthlessness and industry regarding her ability to pass through difficult terrain and narrow passages. For Mesopotamian sources see Marcus 1977, 86-106. The ant's habit to bite as a vindictive reaction is mentioned in one of the Amarna letters sent by Lab'ayu, the governor of Shechem, to justify his aggressive behavior to prisoners under his guard (EA 252, lines 16-22). See Moran 1992, 305-306. The aspect of the ant's diligence is exemplified in a letter to God written by Sargon, king of Assyria, in which the ant's great ability of passing through difficult terrain and narrow passages referred to the king as similitude (TCL 3,24; 143). See Marcus, *ibid*.

⁶Identified by Tristram 1867, 319-321 as the *Messor Semirufus*; see also Bodenheimer 1950, 2: 263.

⁷Roth 1965.

⁸Tristram, op. cit., 75.

⁹McKane 1970, 660-662.

¹⁰See Exod 10:4-20 and cf. Ps 105:34-35 and in the prophetic books see Isa 33:4; Jer 46:23; Joel 1:4; 2:2-12; Nah 3:15-18.

¹¹Thompson 1955, 52-55.

¹²Cf. 1 Sam 17:43; 2 Sam 9:8; 16:9. Fensham 1966, 504-507 describes other images of the dog as a metaphoric expression of humiliation in biblical literature; see also Coats 1970, 14-26.

¹³For the frequency of admonitions against being 'hot tempered' see Prov 14:29; 15:18; 18:18; 22:8. This behavior is considered as typical of the fool to be condemned, and thus upholds the present MT reading.

Bibliography

- Alt 1976 A. Alt, 'Solomonic Wisdom', in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (The Library of Biblical Studies), ed. H.M. Orlinsky, New York 1976 (translated by D.A. Knight), 102-12 (= *ThLZ* 76, 1951, 139-144).
- Bodenheimer 1950 F.S. Bodenheimer, *Animal Life in Palestine*, Part 2, Jerusalem 1950 (In Hebrew).
- Coats 1970 G.W. Coats, 'Self-Abasement and Insult Formulas', *JBL* 89, 1970, 14-26.
- Fensham 1966 F.C. Fensham, 'The Dog in Exodus XI, 7', *Vetus Testamentum* 16, 1966, 504-507.
- Fox 1986 M.V. Fox, 'Egyptian Onomastica and Biblical Wisdom', *Vetus Testamentum* 36, 1986, 302-310.
- Fox 2000 M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible, 18A), New York 2000.
- Marcus 1977 D. Marcus, 'Animal Similies in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions', *Orientalia* 46, 1977, 86-106.
- Mckane 1970 W. McKane, *Proverbs, A New Approach* (Old Testament Library), London 1970.
- Moran 1992 W.L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, Baltimore & London 1992.

- Roth 1965 W.M.W. Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament* (Vetus Testamentum Supplements, 13), Leiden 1965.
- Scott 1976 R.B.Y. Scott, 'Solomon and the beginning of Wisdom in Israel' in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (The Library of Biblical Studies) ed. H.M. Orlinsky, New York 1976, 84-101 (= *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 3, 1955, 262-279).
- Thompson 1955 J.A. Thompson, 'Joel's Locusts in the Light of Near Eastern Parallels', *JNES* 14, 1955, 52-55.
- Tristram 1867 H.B. Tristram, *Natural History of the Bible*, London 1867.