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Review Article

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New Directions for Thinking about the Bible and Nonhuman Animals: A Review of Works by Peter Atkins, Dong Hyeon Jeong, and Saul Olyan

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Abstract

Three new monographs have appeared in 2023 that explore the Bible and nonhuman animals: Peter Joshua Atkins, *The Animalising Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4: Reading Across the Human-Animal Boundary* (London: T&T Clark, 2023; pp. xiv + 260); Dong Hyeon Jeong, *Embracing the Nonhuman in the Gospel of Mark* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023; pp. xii+177); Saul M. Olyan, *Animal Rights and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: OUP, 2023; pp. xii+144). This review brings these books into conversation, suggesting six questions that they grapple with and which might stimulate further research.

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Keywords

animal studies – interspecies – animal ethics – intersectionality

2023 has been an important year for studies of the Bible and nonhuman animals. As well as there being a proliferation of activity at international conferences,[1] three new monographs have appeared in this area, by Peter Joshua Atkins,[2] Dong Hyeon Jeong,[3] and Saul M. Olyan.[4] These books are varied in their nature, methods, texts, and conclusions, yet they all grapple with shared questions around nonhuman animals, and they all make significant contributions to the conversation. Each of these books was a joy for me to read. The remarks below follow the ethos of Jeong; the literature review is intended, like his, "as a celebration of the richness of one's community" (9). And rich it is.

In *Animal Rights and the Hebrew Bible,* Saul Olyan explores the multivocality of Hebrew Bible texts relating to animal rights. He shows how some texts grant genuine legal rights and limited legal personhood to animals, while others neglect to protect animals' interests and present them as no more than property. He analyses a wide range of texts which, for example, evince a legal concern for animal rights (Exod 23:10–11; 23:12; Lev 25:2–7; Deut 5:12–15), present animals as covenant partners (Gen 9:8–17; Hos 2:20 [ET 2:18]), assume that animals have duties and culpabilities (Gen 6:11–12, 9:5; Exod 19:12–13; 21:28–32), suggest that animals and humans are subject to comparable axes of inequality (Exod 22:28b–29 [ET 29b–30], 34:19–20; Lev 21:16–24, 22:17–25, 27:1–13, 28–29), and may show concern for animal welfare (Deut 25:4; Prov 12:10).

By contrast, Peter Atkins focuses on one specific biblical text. In *The Animalising Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4: Reading Across the Human-Animal Boundary*, Atkins analyses the intriguing story in which Nebuchadnezzar is depicted in the wilderness eating grass like an ox, his body parts transformed to resemble eagles' feathers and birds' claws. Atkins surveys the history of interpretation of this passage, examines its various textual

1 In March 2023, a conference was hosted online, called "Humanimal: The Bible and Animal Others." In June 2023, a conference met in Germany to discuss "The Animal in the New Testament and Greco-Roman World." In November 2023, a new research unit on "The Bible and Animal Studies" was launched at the SBL annual meeting in San Antonio.

2 Peter Joshua Atkins, *The Animalising Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4: Reading Across the Human-Animal Boundary* (London: T&T Clark, 2023).

3 Dong Hyeon Jeong, *Embracing the Nonhuman in the Gospel of Mark* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023).

4 Saul M. Olyan, *Animal Rights and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: OUP, 2023).

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traditions, and discusses how the human-animal boundary was conceptualised in ancient West Asia. He then applies these findings to Daniel 4, arguing that Nebuchadnezzar is not physically transformed into an animal but, through the loss of his reason, he undergoes a more significant transformation: "from *categorically* human to *categorically* animal" (189, italics original). That is, he has crossed the conceptual boundary-line, losing his classification and status as a human (with all their value-laden repercussions) and adopting those of an animal.

Dong Hyeon Jeong's interest is broader than just animals; he combines animality with vegetality and animacy theories in *Embracing the Nonhuman in the Gospel of Mark*. He draws on wide-ranging theorists in his postcolonial and ecocritical engagements with Mark, challenging his readers to think more expansively and creatively about nonhumans of all kinds. He explores what it means for Mark's Jesus to be with the wild beasts (Mk 1:13), takes vegetal lessons from the plants which instantiate God's empire (4:1–20, 26–29, 30–32; 11:12–14, 20–21; 13:28), examines the affect generated by pig carcasses in the Sea of Galilee (5:1–20), and grapples with Jesus' canine animalisation of the Syrophoenician woman (7:24–30). Though Jeong's focus is on the New Testament (and thus outside the usual scope of this journal), his work is included here for its significance for the study of similar issues in the Hebrew Bible.

Each author displays concern for ethics and justice, particularly around animals. In Atkins' work these issues are somewhat underdeveloped (occurring primarily in his closing reflections [196–197]), and they could have been more thoroughly embedded throughout. Olyan and Jeong give them more sustained attention. Olyan's primary ethical framework is "animal rights." This is a pragmatic and understandable choice, as rights provide a well-known discourse with political and legal potency. Yet Olyan does not deal with the significant criticisms that this discourse has received, especially from feminist ethicists.[5] For example, the abstract and decontextualized principles with which rights discourse begins may be ill-equipped to deal with the messy particularities of real life. Furthermore, its unemotional rationalism gives little room for compassion, relationship, or dialogue; that is, for genuine encounters between beings. It assumes a society of individuated subjects due protections from external forces, rather than an entangled biosphere where creatures' lives are knotted together in affective encounter.

Jeong's ethics draw more fully on these feminist ideas, as well as incorporating postcoloniality, ecocriticism, and other critical tools. The drawback here,

5 E.g., Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (eds), *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), especially 4–6, 58–86.

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though, is that some readers may find these aspects of Jeong's work inaccessible. Indeed, Jeong sees his approach as operating "at the dawn of a new epistemic break" (126) influenced by postmodernism and the philosophical ruptures of recent critical theory. By definition, this approach has yet to reach the mainstream, so the practical implications of his work might not find traction with all. The tools employed by Olyan and Atkins are more traditional; as Olyan puts it, "the humanistic tools of critical assessment native to the contemporary university" (15–16). This may make their work more palatable within mainstream biblical studies, though it may lack some innovation, and we might question how appropriate "humanism" is in a book on nonhuman animals.

Despite these methodological differences, there is a good deal of commonality in these authors' major concerns. In what remains of this review, I draw out six shared questions that stimulate them and which will likely continue to invigorate researchers in the years ahead. How we answer these questions may have ethical implications for both humans and animals.

The first question is fundamental: *is there a dividing line and hierarchy between humans and nonhuman animals?* Until recently, Western intellectual tradition (including academic biblical studies) has worked with an assumption that humans are distinct from and superior to other animals. This ideology is particularly associated with philosophers like René Descartes, for whom animals were deemed automata and humans alone were endowed with rationality. However, as Atkins points out (196), modern scientific studies reveal this division as illusory. Every characteristic once thought distinctive to humans – intellect, language, morality, and so on – has been found exemplified in other species. This has laid the foundation for new approaches to animals. Jeong thus notes that "one of the core arguments of animality studies is the eradication of the Cartesian human-animal hierarchy and divide" (28), an eradication that profoundly shapes his own work. He and other scholars are now reassessing biblical materials open to unearthing alternative paradigms for species relations.

However, Atkins challenges us to consider whether this logocentric and value-laden bifurcation is just a product of the (post-)Cartesian West, or whether it might already have roots in ancient texts. He shows how, across multiple ancient West Asian (128–152) and biblical (156–169) sources, humans are distinguished from animals by the former's possession of wisdom. I think Atkins might flatten these diverse corpora somewhat. There are multiple biblical texts, for example, which describe animals with wisdom; e.g., Jer 8:7; Job 12:7–8; Prov 6:6–8, 30:24–28, 30:24–28, even as the distinction between humans and animals remains important and pervasive. Atkins analyses this dynamic in Daniel 4, in which Nebuchadnezzar transgresses the divide. Upon

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receiving the heart of an animal, Nebuchadnezzar correlatively loses his reason (181–185; Dan 4:13). This is exemplified by his loss of language, as his first-person self-narration ceases (186–188; 4:19–33). Similarly, for Olyan, language proves an important species marker. While humans often receive verbal commands from God, animals do not, presumably deemed intellectually incapable of such communication (Olyan 82).

But even though animals receive no commands, they are still expected to obey certain rules (Olyan 61–74). That is, they are considered in some sense moral/legal agents with moral/legal culpability. This leads to my second question: *Who – which living* (*or non-living*) *beings – counts as an agent?* Olyan shows how animals bear responsibility, for example, for becoming corrupted (Gen 6:11–13), for shedding blood (9:5–6), for touching the holy mountain (Exod 19:12–13), and for goring to death (21:28–32). By suggesting animals' agency, these verses exemplify the "limited legal personhood" which Olyan finds ascribed to nonhumans more broadly across biblical texts. Jeong goes further: not only animals may have agency, but all beings. He draws on Bruno Latour's ideas about "actants," stressing "the affective capacities of all entities, including the so-called inanimate objects" (17). No longer is a being's agentive potential dependent on their human-like characteristics, like reason or language. This leads Jeong to recognise the actancy of beings as diverse as Mark's plants and soil (61–63), dogs and breadcrumbs (119–121), sea and pig carcasses contained within (81–96).

For one being to act requires another being to be acted upon. For neither Olyan nor Jeong is this a clean-cut division. Olyan stresses that animals – even when they are endowed with rights and responsibilities – remain "property" (though this term's capitalistic connotations may make it an unsatisfactory fit for biblical economics). They thereby embody simultaneously the seemingly contradictory statuses of "legal persons" and "legal things" (124–126) – both subjects who act and objects acted upon. Jeong pushes this further, refusing to subscribe to a model of distinct, active subjects exerting agency over external, passive objects. Instead, he imagines an entanglement of beings, mutually transforming each other through iterative interaction.

This mutually transformative potential raises a third question: *What might it mean to "be with" another being, specifically to "be with" an animal*? Or, to focalise one of Jeong's examples, what does it mean for Jesus to spend time "with the wild beasts" (Mk 1:13; Jeong 33–51)? Jeong stresses that these creatures are not symbols or literary devices, but real living animals with affective capacities. As such, Jesus may have been profoundly changed by the encounter. Indeed, humans throughout history have had life-altering experiences with nonhumans; Jeong takes examples from contemporary theorists – Jacques

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Derrida with a cat, Carol Adams with a horse, and Aldo Leopold with a wolf (46–48). For Jeong, Jesus is consequently provoked into solidarity with animals and the animalised. Like Jeong's Jesus, Atkins' Nebuchadnezzar is changed by his experience "with the wild beasts" (Dan 4:22, 29 [ET 4:25, 32]).[6] He starts behaving like them, eating grass like an ox and (in OG) joining them in nakedness (185–186). And, though Atkins does not elaborate on this, perhaps the encounter stimulates Nebuchadnezzar's subsequent humility before God. Through "being with" animals, Jesus and Nebuchadnezzar might enter into co-constitutive and transformative becomings, invited "into a new relationality" with creatures beyond themselves (Jeong 48).

This has implications for interspecies ethics. Olyan, as noted above, has a consistent concern for ethics. And while most of his interpretations suggest an ethic based on rights rather than relationship, there is an exception: his discussion of Proverbs 12:10 (100–106). This verse exhorts that one should (in Olyan's translation) "know the feelings of his beast." This ethos entails compassion and empathy for the marginalised other – an ethic of care based on relationship and intimacy. It can begin nowhere other than "being with" an animal.

Of course, being with one another might result, not in care, but in harm. This harm might implicate both animals and humans. Thus, a fourth question: *How is the treatment of nonhuman animals intersectionally related to the treatment of humans?* All three authors pay attention to groups of marginalised humans alongside groups of animals and show how their fates are interconnected. Indeed, the ideologies, institutions, and practices which oppress humans and nonhumans are often entangled. Olyan shows how humans and livestock may be classified together (32–34), or subject to the same axes of inequality (93–94). Jeong suggests that the important feminist work on intersectionality would be strengthened by incorporating animals into the intersectional matrix (20–23).

One example concerns persons with cognitive impairments. Recall the pervasive idea that humans are distinguished from animals by their intellect (discussed above). This linear schema would position animals and cognitively impaired humans close together. The implications of this are double-sided. On the one hand, if these humans are given societal value and personhood, so might these animals be (Olyan 6, 62). On the other, if these animals are considered dispensable and ethically irrelevant, so might these humans be

6 Elsewhere, Atkins has applied his findings about Nebuchadnezzar to the passage about Jesus which Jeong explores. He concludes that "Jesus activity 'with the wild beasts' (Mk 1:13) should be understood as referring to a change in Jesus behaviour" (12). Peter Joshua Atkins, "The Son of Man Behaving Beastly: Reading Jesus and the Wild Animals of Mk 1.13 with Dan. 4," *JSNT* (2023): 1–16.

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(Atkins 196). Atkins shows how animality and human neurodiversity are closely intertwined in the interpretive tradition around Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. For example, Nebuchadnezzar's animalistic condition was explained in the 4th–5th centuries CE as "madness, insanity, and mental disease" (17), and medicalized in the 16th–21st centuries according to various diagnoses (44–51). The connection between animals and disabled persons is evident in Olyan's and Jeong's work too. Olyan shows how ideologies of whole and defective bodies implicate humans and animals alike within cultic schemata (93–94). For example, priests and sacrificial animals with "defects" are barred from sacrificing or being sacrificed, respectively. Going further, Jeong explores the joint vulnerability of the flesh of animals and disabled humans, exposing the bestial logics which mangle this flesh and turn it into meat (121–123). For Jeong, this has implications for understanding Jesus' crucifixion.

Beyond disability, other axes of inequality are pertinent. Consider enslavement: as Olyan (36, 123–124) and Jeong (42–43) show, slaves have throughout history been bestialised and treated akin to livestock. Or consider gender: While Olyan argues that gender is not as relevant for animals as it is for humans (94), Jeong shows how joint dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and animality are mutually implicated in specific cases, such as the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 (103–123). Jesus reveals himself to be trapped within a colonial mindset, mimicking the oppressors when he disparages this woman as a "dog."

Indeed, such animalisation has been a powerful strategy of oppression throughout history, as humans are depicted as animals to justify their maltreatment. This leads to a fifth question: *How do the dynamics of animalisation operate?* Jeong demonstrates forcefully how animalisation is wielded against colonised others in the present day (1–3), in the Greco-Roman world (38–43), and in the gospel of Mark (e.g. 33–51, 103–123). Drawing on Giorgio Agamben, he suggests that animalisation amounts to a reduction from *bios* to *zoe*; that is, from the socially and politically meaningful life of a citizen to the dispensability of animal flesh (7). This latter state, Agamben calls "bare life." Jeong shows how the biopolitics of bare life is wielded against colonised humans in Mark (38, 44, 114), forcing them into a sacrificial structure where their flesh no longer matters.

The dynamics of animalisation are also reflected on in Atkins' work. The target of animalisation, though, is no longer the colonised, but rather the coloniser: the Imperial ruler Nebuchadnezzar. Cast into the wilderness, Nebuchadnezzar is animalised in his physical form and his behaviours. Though Atkins does not apply Agamben's ideas here, we might (with Jeong) be prompted to do so. Nebuchadnezzar's transformation has sometimes been understood as lycanthropic; that is, as akin to a werewolf's (Atkins 33–37). The werewolf is, for Agamben, a parade example of bare life – a being outside the civilised polis

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who can be killed with impunity.[7] And, like the werewolf, Nebuchadnezzar is not transformed completely. He resembles a creature who, in Agamben's words, "is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither."[8]

Reducing a being to bare life means rendering them killable. This leads to my final question: *What are the values and interplay of life and death for humans and animals?* It is easy to assume that life is an ultimate good, to be valued and sought by all creatures. Indeed, the right to life is a basic right in Olyan's investigations (3–8). It is most fully instantiated in texts like Hos 2:20, in which humans and animals "are accorded a right to life and a right to bodily integrity and are no longer subject to any kind of killing or physical harm" (50). Going further, Atkins shows a pervasive trend in ancient West Asian (114–128), biblical (155–165), and Second Temple (165–169) texts in which humans strive to overcome mortality. Indeed, mortality is what connects humans to animals and distinguishes them from the gods. In Atkins' reading of Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar's aim is to emulate the divine rule of "the one who lives forever" (4:31 [ET 4:34]; 176–179).

However, Nebuchadnezzar does not achieve his aim, and we might question whether life really is such an ultimate good. As Jeong points out, in the organic world, life and death are entangled. Taking "vegetal lessons" from the plants in Mark's gospel, he explores the "simultaneous multiplicities of growth and decay" (78) which "blur the demarcations of life and death" (74). He challenges us to imagine an ethic where life is no longer primary, and which makes room for decay. Here, Jeong comes close to Donna Haraway without mentioning her directly. Haraway writes: "We are compost, not posthuman" (and note Jeong's reservations about the term "posthuman" for his project [27]) "… Critters – human and not – become-with each other, compose and decompose each other."[9] For Haraway, as for Jeong, "multispecies storytelling … [is] as full of dying as living."[10]

Overall, these three books by Peter Atkins, Dong Hyeon Jeong, and Saul Olyan prove to be productive conversation partners – both for each other, and for the scholars who will interact with them in the years ahead. There are no straightforward answers to the above-discussed six questions animating their discussions. Nevertheless, it is vital that we grapple with these sorts of

7 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 104–111.
8 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 105, italics original.
9 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 97.
10 Haraway, *Staying*, 10.

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issues. We live in a multispecies world, and the harms of anthropocentrism are all too obvious at a time of ecological degradation, climate chaos, and mass extinction. The Bible, with its formative power over mindsets and ideologies, has played its part in leading to this situation of global catastrophe. And yet – perhaps – if more interpreters join with Atkins, Jeong, and Olyan to approach it with concerns for other critters, the Bible might provide resources for living forward together in a multispecies world.

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