

Sinners as Beasts: Some Early Patristic Views of Animals in Ecclesiastes

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Abstract

This essay constitutes an initial attempt to decipher early patristic views on animals by critically examining the responses of five eminent early Christian thinkers to the man-beast references contained in Ecclesiastes 3: 18-21: Thaumaturgus (213 – 270 AD), Didymus the Blind (313 – 398 AD), Chrysostom (347 – 407 AD), Jerome (347 – 420 AD), and Augustine (354 – 430 AD). Salient patterns of interpretation are identified and discussed in comparative terms contrasting ancient Hebraic and conventional biblical views with early patristic views as needed. Overall, the general finding here is that most of these early Christian thinkers (save Augustine) were heavily inclined not to interpret these verses contextually nor in Qoheleth's own terms nor within the range of ancient Hebraic theology and cosmology. Instead, they tended to substitute Qoheleth's terms with their own and rewrite verses to arrive at entirely different meanings, concluding that Qoheleth was contrasting righteous human beings with depraved, wicked, sinful, or faithless people, not animals per se. The general patristic view was that since animals are not rational, differ in language and speech, and don't have souls, among other key differences, life for them terminates on earth, access to the afterlife denied. Significantly, these claims about animals were made largely without a comprehensive exploration of other biblical texts pertinent to the issue of animal afterlife.

Keywords: Qoheleth; Ecclesiastes; beasts; biblical perspective; righteous; wicked; spirit; soul; breath; Church Fathers; exegesis; eisegesis; biblical perspective; Christological paradigm; Hebrew Bible.

Introduction

If you have read the text of Ecclesiastes,¹ you will no doubt recall that Qoheleth argues a similar fate awaits animals or ‘beasts’ and the ‘sons of men’ in Eccl 3: 18-21. They both die, possess identical breaths, and go to the same place in the earth at death. But Qoheleth admits at the end of those verses with much less certainty as to where the ‘breaths’² of animals versus

¹ For the uninitiated, Ecclesiastes is classified as part of the Ketuvim (or “writings”) of the Hebrew Bible. In the Christian tradition, it belongs to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The English title is commonly understood to be a Latin transliteration from a Greek translation of a Hebrew word variously spelt (Kohelet, Koheleth, Qohelet, Qoheleth). As you will note, here we adopt the Qoheleth spelling. The author is unnamed and introduces himself as “son of David, king in Jerusalem” and only returns with his own voice at the very end of the book to summarize what the character Qoheleth has said and to provide his own reflections on these statements. In a brief manner of speaking, the basic premise of the book is that all of life is vanity, futile, or simply ‘vapor’ or ‘hevel’ in Hebrew. Since the lives of both the wise and the foolish end in death, it follows that no eternal meaning can be ascribed to earthly human life with any degree of certitude. Therefore, enjoy the simple pleasures of life since they are gifts from God, fear Him reverentially, and obey His commandments, for that is the duty of humanity. There are many controversies surrounding this biblical text including authorship, date, title, structure, and several other hot-button philosophical issues such as hedonism, pessimism, and existentialism. Although they are important issues to resolve within contemporary biblical scholarship, we are not so much concerned with them other than indirectly if they touch upon our central focus on animal afterlife (Weeks, 2010, pp. 70-84; Wright, 2005, pp. xxii-xxiv).

² The term for soul in Hebrew is ‘nephesh’, which literally means “breath”. This life-breath was a gift from God to both animals and humanity a la Genesis 2:7; 7:22, and 6:17. This Hebrew term is also tied to the notion of life-blood in both Leviticus 17:11 and Genesis 9:4. When the breath leaves the body or the blood stops circulating in the body, then death of the soul occurs (Lev 19:28 and Num 6:6). The ancient Hebrews did not believe in the presence of an immortal soul within a physical human body, as did Plato. Simply put, there was no soul without the physical body. Therefore, the afterlife was a non-life place consisting of shadows where everyone goes at death completely alienated from God. Consequently, this

humanity go after death. On the one hand, all of earthly human life is ‘vapor’ or ‘hevel’ in Hebrew, to which we can ascribe no eternal meaning; on the other hand, enjoy God’s gifts of simple pleasures, fear Him adoringly, obey His commandments, and hope for the best divine judgment in the afterlife. Even though the contradictions abound, the ancient Hebraic message remains clear.

From this perspective, then, the ‘breaths’ of the sons of men would have to equate to their souls, presumably not merely the biological life-giving force. And, of course, adopting a Christological perspective, there would be no reason for the breaths or souls of the sons of men to return to God other than to enable God to judge the earthly behavior of those to whom it was given since Genesis makes clear from whence that breath was derived.

In terms of how animals are conceived within this perspective, however, the story is less clear. According to Genesis, animals were created by God in a different way and for a different purpose than human beings. Still, God cares deeply about each and every living creature of his creation all of which He declared as being good. Therefore, the assumption is that animals are to accompany the righteous sons of men in the halls of Paradise or Heaven, if you will.

Martin Luther himself believed this was the case based on his interpretations of Acts 3: 21 and Romans 8: 18-22. The illustrious C.S. Lewis interpreted Isaiah 11: 6-8; 65: 17 and Revelation 21: 1 with much the same effect (Conger, 2018; Evensen, 2013; Lacey, 2020; Mathias, 2012). Although many Christian leaders and thinkers over time have assumed the possibility or existence of an animal afterlife, technically speaking, there seem to be no explicit verses in the Bible that

life is the only life that really matters, not a gloomy or shadowy afterlife as a shadow in Sheol (Ahbel-Rappe, 2023; Klein, 2012; Kohler, 2016; Swinburne, 1997).

claim animals go to Heaven at death or that they have eternal life.

Evidently, this ambiguity has left the door open for varied scholarly and religious opinions on the matter. Jews, Protestants, and Catholics disagree both among and between themselves in a great variety of opinions simply too numerous to recount here. However, it's a different issue as to whether Scripture claims animals have souls, which surely implies a great deal about the presence of animals in eternal Paradise.

The Hebrew Bible teaches that animals have souls in Genesis 1:30 and 9: 10, although it is unclear if the 'breath of life' mentioned there is identical to human souls. From the Wisdom literature, Job 12: 10 adopts the position that the 'spirits' of animals appears only to be a life-energizing force rather than a timeless spiritual soul, as it is assumed to be for humanity. For human beings, it is claimed there, the soul is the seat of all reason, feelings, conscience, and everything else that is the virtual essence of the person, and hence, fundamentally different from animals, or so it is presumed to be. Once again, notice that the emphasis always seems to be placed upon the differences rather than the similarities between human beings and animals.

Regardless, the ancient Hebrew Bible claims categorically that animals have souls (nephesh) and spirits (ruach) even though it is true they were not created in the image of God (Genesis 9: 6) and neither were they given the same calling by the Creator God as was bestowed upon humankind. In the rank order of physical creation by God, Genesis 1: 26-28 confirms man's dominion (not domination) or strict responsibility to care for and not abuse the animal kingdom.

Other texts in the Bible go much further beyond these claims about the status and relationship of animals to humanity. For example, Proverbs 12: 10 as well as several verses in Psalm 104 make clear that loving and caring for animals is a prime

indication of righteousness. It is expressly asserted there that a person who loves and cares for animals in practice rather than merely in words is a righteous person. Therefore, we should love and care for God's animal creation as He Himself loves and cares for it since we are made in His image. Generally, this is the view from the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, again technically speaking, supposedly they are not guaranteed eternal life and glorified bodies a la New Testament claims in Corinthians and Thessalonians. As far as we know, animals don't appear capable of repenting for their sinful behaviors, professing belief in Christ as a portal to animal resurrection, and subject to God's final judgment. On the other hand, do they really have to be capable of doing such things as a condition of entrance into the afterlife or even to be part of God's plan for salvation? Are animals even capable of knowing when they have sinned against themselves or human beings, intentionally or not? From a biblical point of view, can we say that animals do not have an 'understanding' of God? From God's point of view, is this even applicable to animals as a condition of enjoying a privileged presence in Paradise? Lots of questions abound, but arguably there appear to be no clear and facile biblical answers. The intention here is not to be sarcastic, of course, but simply to point out the obvious and typical claims.

In the final analysis, the relative silence of the Bible on such topics should not be construed by humanity as God's silent verdict on the matter by any stretch of the theological imagination. At the very least, and from within a Christological paradigm, it seems impossible to conclude that injustices committed against them do not have serious spiritual repercussions. And it certainly does not mean that God did not provide a place for them in His kingdom after expiration. Anyone who has ever had a beloved dog or cat or parrot or rabbit as a pet for any amount of time would certainly beg to differ with the typical evolutionary claim (Horvat, 2018) that animals don't have souls or don't have emotions or don't feel pain and joy or don't'....

All this having been said by way of preliminary commentary in order to highlight some of the important controversial issues to be considered as a backcloth in any discussion about animal afterlife, let us now briefly review what a few eminent early Christian thinkers thought about some of these issues through a careful examination of their commentaries on the man-beast references in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Gregory Thaumaturgus (213 – 270 AD)

Thaumaturgus was one of the earliest Church Fathers³ to address the man-beast references in Ecclesiastes largely from the vantage point of literal hermeneutics. Essentially, he agrees with Qoheleth that both man and beast die and return to the dust of the earth as stated in Genesis 3. However, whereas Qoheleth is busy establishing similarities in the life situation of men and animals, at least in broad terms, Thaumaturgus is just as busy underscoring what he feels to be essential differences, and then underlining those perceived differences to make certain comments about animal afterlife.

One key difference he stresses is in regards to language and speaking. On the one hand, it is agreed that men and beasts share the same breath of life, an energizing life-force as mentioned above. So, therefore, they share the same fate when that breath expires, namely, death. However, unlike Qoheleth's genuinely sarcastic 'who-knows-where-the-breaths-of-men-and-animals-go-after-death' approach in Ecclesiastes 3: 21, Thaumaturgus adopts a more decisive interpretation.

³ Various known by contemporary biblical scholars as the Church Fathers, the Apostolic Fathers, the Christian Fathers, Fathers of the Church, and here the early Church Fathers, they were a select group of ancient Christian theologians and writers viewed as most influential in establishing the intellectual and doctrinal groundwork of the Christian faith as we know it today. They lived and worked mostly from the late first to the mid-8th centuries AD, a historical period known as the Patristic Era (Peterson, 2016; Rasmussen, 2011).

He opts for arguing that human beings have souls, not just a life-force breath, implying, of course, that animals don't. What's more, this energizing life-force cannot be conceived of as being a 'soul' per se. The energizing life-force and the soul are qualitatively different species, so to speak, and one is eternal while the other is not. It is never demonstrated how this conclusion is arrived at nor is there a thorough exploration of other biblical texts that might suggest otherwise such as Genesis and the prophetic texts.

In his way of thinking, animals don't have souls whereas humans do, although he still remains a bit uncertain as to whether human souls ascend to heaven while the life-force or breath of animals descends to the earth. Along with the facility of speaking in language, he views this as a distinct advantage which human beings have over animals. Dissent with some part of Qoheleth's verse compels him to paraphrase a meaning not specified in the text itself. Interestingly, from the standpoint of creation doctrine, he also never questions why it is necessary for one to have advantage over the other and what other biblical texts may have to say about this claim, since both were created by God (Baynes and Smith, 2006; Herbermann, 2015; Jarrick, 1990; Orthodox Church of America, 2024; Schaff, 2019; Slusser, 1998; Van Dam, 1982; Vatican News, 2017; Wright, 2018).

Didymus (the Blind) (313 – 398 AD)

Fortunately for the purposes of this study, the fragments of Ecclesiastes commentaries found in the Tura codices in Egypt in 1941 begin with interpretations of Qoheleth's man-beast analogies in 3: 18-21. Indeed, comparatively speaking, there are very few commentaries by early Christian thinkers on these specific Qoheleth verses. In those verses, as we know, Qoheleth compares the 'sons of men' with 'beasts' in those verses, arguing that a similar fate befalls them both in terms of death and returning to dust. According to conventional interpretation it is important to note that he is not equating beasts with the sons

of men but differentiating between two different species, of course.

Very much like Thaumaturgus, Didymus begs to differ with Qoheleth, insisting that language and the faculty of speech differentiates human beings from animals. In other words, in his mind Didymus presumes from the start that animals cannot articulate their thoughts and feelings as can human beings, and this inability has practical implications for the application of concepts such as 'soul' and 'heaven' to animals. Interestingly, also like Thaumaturgus, there is no philosophical nor biblical confirmation nor exploration of the underlying assumptions characterizing this position.

Therefore, Didymus suggests, animals are not rational or reasonable beings, whereas human beings are. From a kind of spiritual tunnel vision, as it were, the possibility that animals may possess a different sort of soul, employ a different kind of reasoning, and speak a different kind of language or even have a different divine calling is not entertained at all. Consequently, human beings are similar to angels in the Christian pecking order, perhaps slightly slower, whereas animals don't rank at all, at least not in the same ranking system.

According to Didymus, this means that human souls can advance and even perfect understanding of God, implying that animals do not possess this unique capacity or don't understand God in another way. He insists that when Qoheleth compares the fate of man and beast, he is not referring to the death of reason but, rather, to the literal death of the body. This position on the fate of human reason at death allows him to differentiate himself from the conventional understanding of Qoheleth's man-beast statements which underscores merely similarities.

It is clear that Didymus is applying an allegorical interpretation of Qoheleth's verses rather than a literal translation to arrive at this conclusion, as Thaumaturgus did. Since they are near to

angels in nature, it is assumed that animals are definitely not. The result of this sort of thinking for conceptions of animal afterlife are obvious. After death human beings can either go to heaven or be condemned, whereas access for animals is blocked because they supposedly cannot be held accountable for earthly behaviors. The implication is that human beings are subject to divine judgment, whereas animals are not included.

Admittedly, even though they may also have souls, the death of animals means that both animal flesh and soul are terminated, unlike for human beings. Again, the assumption here is that there is no divine accountability or judgment of animal behavior nor abusive treatment of animals by human beings after death. Didymus claims this is emphatically not the case for the soul of human beings. Why? Didymus asserts that it jettisons its human host at death and continues to exist somewhere in the spiritual realm, undoubtedly awaiting final judgment. Qoheleth may entertain doubts about the existence of an afterlife altogether, both human and beast, but Didymus argues otherwise.

Furthermore, Didymus also insists that Qoheleth never talks about the human soul per se, choosing instead to refer to the biological life-force energy of 'breath'. It is precisely this life-force of breath analogy that Qoheleth wishes to stress in his comparison with beasts, Didymus asserts, not the spirit or the 'soul' as conceived within a Christological paradigm. From Didymus' point of view, that is why Qoheleth continually stresses the physical bodily or flesh features of both man and beast to claim that they share this particular common fate.

It is in this specific sense that human beings possess no advantage over animals, not in terms of the broader meaning of fate or eternal destiny. The sensory functions of humans may be similar to animals, but they are not identical. That's what Qoheleth really means to point out, Didymus claims. Therefore, he concludes, man is not converted to nothing or completely destroyed at death, like what happens to animals. Whereas

Qoheleth would admit that no one knows what happens to the spirit of animals after breath expires, Didymus believes that human beings are typically misled into thinking this way mostly due to the ever-changing nature of temporal existence on earth.

Consequently, following this mistaken belief, they start to think everything is futile or vain or vapor (hevel), like what Qoheleth repeats over and over again. Didymus' strongest position against Qoheleth is precisely at this point of intimating that everything, including 'heaven' and 'soul', are vain or futile or vapor, as it were. That is, Didymus reacted strongly to Qoheleth implying that the similar fate of man and beast confirms that heaven, earth and God's creation in general are the vain illusions of the sons of men. However, it is another question altogether whether the ancient Hebraic author of Ecclesiastes is really making or implying this claim at all.

Meek (2016) points this out when he is comparing Didymus' and Chrysostom's view on Qoheleth's hevel. He shows that Didymus agreed with Qoheleth's suggestion that temporal reality must be avoided to the extent possible since it tends to distract central human attention away from God. But that doesn't mean that Didymus agrees that everything is vanity, as Qoheleth seems to suggest. It only means everything is futile apart from or in comparison to the spiritual meaning of human existence. What makes human existence meaningful is faith in God (Ayres, 2012; Bayliss, 2016; Chapman, 2018; Chrisholm, 1993; Cross and Livingstone, 2009; Ehrman, 1986, 1983; Florovsky, 1987; Gauche, 1934; Hicks, 2015; Lascartos and Marketos, 1994, Layton, 2004; Schaff and Wace, 2009; Young and Teal, 2010).

St. John Chrysostom (347 – 407 AD)

Among the few verses that Chrysostom comments upon in Ecclesiastes are Qoheleth's man-beast references. He claims that Qoheleth is not literally comparing man with animals but, rather, men of faith with men of no faith. In other words,

Chrysostom argues that Qoheleth is comparing different types of people, not different species. Furthermore, he asserts that Qoheleth is actually comparing faithful human beings with faithless people referred to as 'beasts'.

People who don't believe in God constantly harangue that He is blameworthy for all manner of injustices on earth and, therefore, cannot possibly exercise enough divine foresight to provide proper guidance or care for human destiny. Instead of glorifying and worshipping God, these people are too busy finding enough fault in Him to deny Him providence. Chrysostom claims that it is these kinds of people holding these types of beliefs which Qoheleth refers to as beasts, not animals per se.

By contrast with this allegorical interpretation, Chrysostom then proceeds to interpret Qoheleth's reference to the shared fate of man and animals in a literal manner, that is, as a physical, bodily death only. He agrees that man and beast share one physical body existence with one life-energizing breath which expires at death. But he has something else to say about Qoheleth's apparent doubt as to what happens afterwards, that is, after death, in the afterlife.

Here Chrysostom applies the resurrection doctrine dominant at his time to interpret Qoheleth's apparent doubt about the afterlife, the 'who-knows' concluding statement of Chapter 3. People who reject the resurrection of Christ are like Qoheleth in this regard, Chrysostom asserts, and by implication they are the 'beasts' Qoheleth speaks about. But this was not actually the author's view, he claims. The man-beast reference is not a comparison of species but, in fact, an intra-species analogy.

So, then, Chrysostom distinguishes between Qoheleth's unbeliever views as a character with the author's personal believer views as a writer. The implication, of course, is that Chrysostom thinks the author created Ecclesiastes in order to compare and contrast the views of resurrection believers and resurrection deniers, which can hardly be the case since the

writer of Ecclesiastes is an Old Testament author (Allen and Mayer, 2000; Attwater, 1960; Carter, 1962; Hill, 2007; Kelly, 1998).

St. Jerome (347 – 420 AD)

Jerome rattles off a solid two pages of exegeses on the man-beast references in Ecclesiastes, nearly the longest response to any of Qoheleth's verses contained in his entire Commentary on Ecclesiastes. Before we explore what he has to say about these verses, we need to briefly review what the ancient Hebraic and modern Jewish religious traditions have to say about the relationship between humanity and animals since the issues that arise there are highly pertinent to both Jerome and Augustine. The parameters of this relationship are divinely ordained and presented in the Bible in several places especially Genesis and Psalms. It bears recalling the biblical man-beast relationship as it pertains to the dominant Christological paradigm of the early Church Fathers.⁴

In Genesis, God openly recognizes animals as good and blesses them, commanding them to reproduce and multiply, but apparently, they are not made in the image of God (Gen 1: 27). It is presumed that only human beings received the breath of God that is his spirit, and that allows him to transcend the world of animals (1 Thes 5: 23). God used his hands like a skillful potter to literally form human beings from the dust of the ground (Gen 2: 7), whereas animals were not created in exactly this way. The assumption is that these differences in the way they were created have important ramifications for access to the afterlife.

⁴ In simple terms, a Christological paradigm or perspective refers to the doctrine of Christ and its related concepts and beliefs, usually concerning the reflections, teachings, and doctrine pertaining to Jesus of Nazareth. More broadly, it encompasses the system of beliefs, values, and principles about the nature and work of Jesus Christ and related concepts such as Incarnation, Resurrection, and the relationship between the human and divine nature of Christ (Hillebrand and Stefon, 2024).

Supposedly, there are important consequences that result from this creational difference. Only human beings were given a faculty of creative thought to communicate with God, ranking them just below the status of angels (Psalm 8: 5), a narrative we have already heard above. Further, human beings were created by God for God, that is, for the purpose of worshipping God as children of God, whereas supposedly animals did not receive this particular calling even in a different form (Col 1: 16). It is not even considered here that animals may have their own languages and their own calling from God Himself. So, then, the Bible clearly distinguishes between human beings and animals at least in these ways, whereas Qoheleth and the modern evolutionary view appear not to do so.

It is interesting to note how St. Jerome deals with these issues in his view of the man-beast relationship propounded by Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes. Well, Jerome shrugs his shoulders and begins matter-of-factly by paraphrasing at length Qoheleth's words, purportedly to demonstrate understanding of the verses. In the process, however, it will be noted that he substitutes and adds many key terms of his own which, in turn, have the effect of changing its initial meaning:

“It is not surprising that there is no distinction in this life between righteous and wicked, nor that none values virtues, but all things occur with uncertain outcome, where nothing seems to differ according to the worthlessness of the body between sheep and men: there is the same birth, common end in death; we proceed similarly towards the light and are equally dissolved into dust. But there seems to be this difference, that the spirit of man ascends to the heavens, and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth, but from where do we know this for certain? Who can know whether what is hoped is true or false?” (Jerome Commentary on Eccl 3: 18-21 in McGregor, 2019)

From the start, Jerome flatly neglects Qoheleth's core ancient Hebraic idea about God 'testing' humankind to make them aware they exist as animals without Him in their lives, stated quite clearly at the start of Chapter 3. Since Jerome does not address this idea, it is doubtful that he understands Qoheleth's intended message here. Nowhere in these man-beast verses do we find Qoheleth talking about 'the righteous and the wicked', as Jerome states, much less so the righteous ascending and the wicked descending. Qoheleth does not even suggest factually that 'there seems to be this difference' between man and beast, as Jerome does.

Neither did Qoheleth propose or suggest in any way whatsoever a distinct difference between man and beast. At the end, Qoheleth simply asks the reader a 'Who-knows?' question, not two questions as Jerome does with 'from where do we know' (location or source) and 'who can know' (person). Therefore, what appears at first glance to be a lengthy accurate re-interpretation of Qoheleth's intended meaning ends up becoming a cleverly-worded substitution of meaning.

Well, then, exactly what does Jerome think Qoheleth is saying about the man-beast relationship? Does Jerome think that Qoheleth believes the 'spirit' of both men and beast die when their body dies, or does he believe that man and beast are destined for separate places after death? Not quite. Jerome draws on ancient biblical texts (Genesis, Job, Luke) to claim that:

“...before the arrival of Christ all were led equally to the nether regions...And in fact before Christ accompanied by a robber opened the wheel of flames..., and the gates of paradise, the heavens were closed and the equal unworthiness of the spirits of sheep and of men was abridged” (Jerome Commentary in Eccl 3: 18-21 in McGregor, 2019).

As we can see here, Jerome is reinterpreting Qoheleth through the dominant Christological perspective of his time in a very specific way even though he well knows it was written from within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological perspective. In doing so, Jerome is bending the intended ancient Hebrew meanings contained within Ecclesiastes in an attempt to make them exegetically applicable to his day and times, not necessarily to render an accurate interpretation from Qoheleth's ancient Hebraic viewpoint. It is another question altogether as to whether this hermeneutical strategy does justice to the underlying religious Hebrew messages that are, in fact, directly applicable to a proper understanding of New Testament Christianity.

Again, there are a number of concepts contained within Jerome's commentary up to this point that are not found in Qoheleth's verses beyond the Christ reference. Qoheleth does not mention anything about the netherworld or underworld, although we can assume Qoheleth's familiarity with it. Qoheleth does not mention anything about the 'spirit' (imputing an eternal soul) of men and beast as Jerome does but, rather, their 'breath' (imputing a biological life-force). Further, Qoheleth says nothing about comparing 'sheep' with 'sons of men' as Jerome does with his Christological approach (presumably to convey the idea of 'the Lord is my shepherd' in Psalm 23: 1 and possibly other biblical texts employing sheep terminology), especially with all the ancient connotations attached to that animal after the life and death of Christ.

In subsequent commentary on these verses, Jerome suggests that Qoheleth argues humans are like beasts in that they are 'weak in body' but they 'differ from beasts in language', ideas not contained in these verses whatsoever. After all, how does Jerome know that beasts don't have their own languages? Answer: He doesn't. Then he states that Qoheleth is not referring to the existence of a soul but, rather, a life-breath (of air) that is the same for both man and beast, and supposedly, Jerome repeats Qoheleth's "...and there is nothing more for

man than for beast”. However, Qoheleth’s original verse is: “they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast” (Eccl 3: 19). In terms of the biological life-force of ‘breath’, Qoheleth does not see much advantage for one nor the other.

When it comes to Qoheleth’s ‘Who-knows?’ question regarding breath ascending upwards or descending downwards, Jerome begins his inquiry with, “But this seems to be blasphemy” when, actually, it’s not. Why? Jerome takes the position that Qoheleth is not stating a difference between man and beast in relation to the “dignity of the soul”. Rather, Qoheleth simply wants to illustrate the “difficulty of the matter” by adding the subjective pronoun ‘who’.

Then once again, Jerome calls up a slew of biblical texts to support his judgment on Qoheleth’s claim, implying that Qoheleth’s way of posing the question is not new to biblical narratives (Isaiah 53: 8; Jer 17: 9; Ps 14: 1/35: 17/72: 23). What’s more, the prophetic texts in the Bible make clear that both man and beast are included in God’s plan of salvation, although how this idea squares with statements about the ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’ of animals descending downwards into the earth is never considered or explored.

In these extra biblical verses, Jerome shows that Qoheleth is not actually adopting a new narrative technique of explicating biblical principles. Will the saintly man ascend to heaven or the sinner or beast go down into the earth? Why should the sinner be considered a ‘beast’ if, in fact, all people are sinners by nature? Is it possible for the righteous man to fall and the sinner to rise? Can the learned man of reason be led down to the underworld while the simpler and unlearned man be crowned in martyrdom in paradise?

These are all questions posed in a great variety of biblical texts, and so Qoheleth’s question is not blasphemous, Jerome asserts. Even the sinner-beast analogy can be found there in these texts. That may or may not be these cases, of course, but in the verses

in question, Qoheleth only refers to beasts, not sinners. And Qoheleth makes absolutely no explicit equivalencies between animals or 'beasts and men, that is, he does not say that sinners or wicked people are beasts.

In most of his commentaries on Ecclesiastes, we can see that Jerome's manner of interpretation is quite similar to that of other early Church Fathers, that is, draw upon biblical texts to support and legitimize reinterpreting the versal text under examination and often attaching another meaning altogether in the process. As for the other early Church Fathers examined here, the biblical hermeneutic that is adopted does not appear to be aimed at deciphering Qoheleth's intended meaning in its own terms or within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological perspective. In other words, it is largely an exercise in eisegesis rather than exegesis.⁵ The result is the transformation of the original similar man-beast fate into a man-beast distinction based mostly on the 'nature of the soul', but also language.

Among other problems already mentioned, the problem here with Jerome's thinking about the biblical view of the 'soul' in the man-beast relationship appears to be that biblical texts tend to disagree with the position that animals have no souls. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, several biblical passages explicitly state that animals have souls including the implicit meanings Jerome does not consider in Ecclesiastes 3: 18-21. The ancient Hebrew Bible also makes clear that God made a covenant with all of Creation, not only humankind (Gen 9: 12-17; Psalm 50: 10-11; Hosea 2: 18).

Other ancient Hebraic biblical texts posit that every earthly animal praise God (Psalm 69: 34/150: 6; Job 12: 7-10; Isaiah 42: 10). Still other ancient biblical verses tell us that animals will be saved and they will accompany humans in heaven

⁵ Generally, eisegesis is reading into a text one's own ideas, whereas exegesis is letting the meaning emerge from the text itself in its original historical context only after careful study (Fahlbusch and Bromiley, 1999).

(Psalm 36: 6; Luke 3: 6; Romans 8: 19-21; John 3: 16). There are so many ancient biblical verses directly relevant to interpretation of Qoheleth's man-beast verses that it's difficult to believe a prolific scholar like Jerome was not aware of them at the time that he wrote Commentary on Ecclesiastes (Cain and Lossi, 2009; Grillo, 2015; Jarrick, 2015; Jerome, 2015; Kelly, 2012; Kelly, 1975; McGregor, 2015; Montiero, 2013; Schaff and Wace, 2022; Wright, 2018).

Augustine (354 – 430 AD)

Only the last verse of Eccl 3: 18-21 which is mentioned by Augustine in his magnum opus, The City of God. Despite the fact that Augustine rambles on for three pages till the end of Book 13 on the broad related topics of this verse comparing and contrasting Hebrew, Latin, and Greek meanings in the process (breath, spirit, bodily life, spiritual life, afterlife, and so forth), we can still deduce a reliable Augustinian viewpoint.

We will no doubt recall the full conventional import of meanings Qoheleth conveys in those verses. God is testing human beings by creating them as animals that they may understand the meaninglessness of earthly life without Him front and center. This is why the fate of the sons of men and literal beasts is alike: they both have the same 'breath', they both 'die', and their physical bodies return afterwards to the place from which they were made, the earth.

Where does the breath of each go after it expires? Who knows? Qoheleth quips, implying that only God knows where the breath of human beings and animals go at death. After death, we cannot observe that the breath of animals goes here and that of humans goes there, so to speak, implying that absolutely no one save God Himself is entitled to speak decisively on this issue.

The ancient Midrashic rabbis interpret these verses as metaphorically comparing righteous 'men' with wicked or

beastly ‘men’. Men who are not righteous believers live as beasts do in the wild but among other men. It’s interesting that who exactly determines the criteria for making one ‘righteous’, or ‘wicked’, for that matter, and what these criteria consist of, is never clearly elaborated. However, this metaphorical interpretation is hardly applicable to Qoheleth given the initial ‘test’ verse which begins the versal sequence in Chapter 3.

Therefore, it is likely that Qoheleth was indeed referring to the breath or spirit of animals in the wild, not human beings viewed as sinful or wicked. We cannot observe whether an animal or a human has a soul or a spirit, so we cannot know for certain where they go after death if they do have one. The best that we can do is to have steadfast faith, fear God adoringly and trustfully, and obey His commandments.

Augustine labors on for nearly three pages to settle some of these questions basing his argument principally on Genesis, but referencing other biblical texts as well, in a much more clear and decisive way than does St. Jerome who waffles quite a bit on the central issues. As for whether or not human beings have souls, Augustine warns the reader not to “carelessly neglect the teaching of Scripture” where it states: “Let the earth bring forth the living soul’ (Gen 1: 24), where all the terrestrial animals were created.” (Augustine, *ibid.*, p. 395). And just a few verses down from the same verse in Genesis where it speaks about all life on dry land had died due to the great flood, Augustine asserts wryly why readers haven’t noticed: “All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.”

Essentially, Augustine’s argument here is that if Scripture can talk about living souls and spirits of life “even in reference to beasts,” then why should we doubt that animals have souls? Indeed, it was the “ordinary style of Scripture to speak of animals “in which the soul serves as the residence of sensation”. Granted, the rational soul of man was not created in the same way as the soul of other animals out of the waters and the earth,

Augustine says, but still God “ordered that it should live in an animal body like those other animals.”

Scripture talks about the creation of souls when it says, “Let the earth produce every living soul”. It is safe to say, therefore, that Augustine here is answering Qoheleth’s ‘Who knows’ question in Eccl 3: 21, namely, animals have souls although not the same type and not made in the same way as that of human souls. If there was any doubt intended or suggested by Qoheleth about the existence of souls in humans and animals, there was no such doubt within Augustine. The physical bodies of animals may perish, but their souls do not (Augustine, 2018; Bonner, 2002; Brown, 2000; Chadwick, 2009; Hollingworth, 2013; Kirwan, 2008; Knowles and Pinkett, 2004; MacCulloch, 2009; O’Donnell, 1999; Rist, 2008; Schaff, 2015; Shaw, 2011).

Conclusion

As we can see from our brief initial review of early patristic statements on the man-beast references contained in Ecclesiastes 3: 18-21, some salient patterns of interpretation emerged regarding notions about animal afterlife and conceptions about animals and human beings in general as well as the relationship between humanity and animals.

Overall, however, the general finding here is that most of these early Christian thinkers (save Augustine) were heavily inclined not to interpret these verses contextually nor in Qoheleth’s own terms nor even within the range of ancient Hebraic theology and cosmology, despite the fact that the author of Ecclesiastes was clearly an ancient Hebrew. Instead, the strong tendency was to substitute Qoheleth’s terms and rewrite verses to arrive at entirely different meanings.

The first salient pattern of interpretation is without doubt. In contrast to Qoheleth, but with the possible exception of Augustine, the patristic consensus seemed to be that animals have neither souls nor rational faculties nor language nor

speech nor other features that might elevate their status in the Christian ranking order of creation. Therefore, the life of animals terminates on earth with access to the afterlife effectively denied.

A second salient pattern of interpretation which emerged from these findings is the claim that Qoheleth was really contrasting righteous human beings with depraved, wicked, sinful, or faithless people, not animals per se. In other words, the assertion was that different types of human beings were compared, not two different species. Therefore, it was believed that Qoheleth definitely was not making any kind of statement about the present or future status of animals in Paradise.

These patristic Christian thinkers seemed to approach the ideas contained or implied in these verses with extreme caution. Perhaps comparing the fate of human beings with animals in any way appeared to wander perilously close to the borders of sacrilegious talk about God or sacred things. Nevertheless, the question of why sinful human beings should be viewed in such an ugly manner as 'beasts' in the wild when all of humanity from within a Christological paradigm is unavoidably sinful by nature a la Genesis apparently never crossed the minds of these early Christian thinkers, again save for Augustine.

This is a central point that brings us to our third salient pattern of interpretation. The patristic claims about animals were made largely without a comprehensive exploration of other biblical texts pertinent to the issue of animal afterlife such as the prophetic or wisdom texts and even Genesis, again with the exception of Augustine. He employed Genesis as a basis for understanding Qoheleth's verses and claimed that there should be no doubt that animals have souls when Scripture itself talks about living souls and spirits in several places. Jerome, for his part, gave lip service to the prophetic texts as proof that animals are included in God's plan of salvation. But in the end, he opted for the sinner-beast analogy since he claimed it could be found in other biblical texts.

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