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## ANIMAL SPEECH AS REVELATION IN GENESIS 3 AND NUMBERS 22

*Cameron B. R. Howard*

The retrieval of the voices of Earth in the Hebrew Bible is a hermeneutical project that requires listening for those voices, be they of animals or other parts of creation, to communicate in ways different from human speech. In two texts, however, nonhuman animals in the Hebrew Bible exhibit a human mode of conversation: the snake chats with Eve in Gen 3, and the donkey rebukes Balaam in Num 22. One might imagine that these Earth voices would require little or no “retrieval,” since the animal characters speak in ways the story’s human characters, as well as we human readers, can understand.

Biblical scholarship, however, has tended to obscure the subjectivity the snake and the donkey exhibit in these two texts, attributing their speech to literary conventions and nothing more.<sup>1</sup> Because the narrators of the two stories do not comment on animal speech as an extraordinary feature, many scholars follow the narrators’ lead, never pausing to engage the talking animal characters as anomalies. In this view, the snake and the donkey have been elevated to the communicative status of human beings simply for narrative effect. A “dumb” donkey (both silent and stupid), who can see what the seer Balaam cannot, serves to ridicule the seer. And in the garden of Eden, only two humans have been created so far; who else will tempt Eve and Adam but another element of creation?

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1. For paradigmatic examples, see Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 47, who emphasizes that the serpent “is a technique to move the plot of the story,” and Ronald A. Veenker, “That Fabulous Talking Snake,” in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word to the World* (ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss and Steven M. Voth; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 265–72, who says, “Any story about a talking snake is, of course, a fable” (265). An exception is Terence Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *General Articles on the Bible, General Articles on the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus* (NIB 1; ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 365–66.

I do not deny that inclusion of nonhuman animals speaking with humans via human speech reflects a literary artistry that uses the animals to develop the characterization of the story's humans—Eve and Balaam—and to help move the plot along. But the uniqueness of these talking animals within the biblical corpus prompts me to investigate these two texts together, to see if the snake of Gen 3 and the donkey of Num 22 share features or functions beyond conventions of genre. The text of each story is saturated with the vocabulary of divine revelation; the speech of the animals, who see and know what the humans cannot, mediates between God and the humans, giving humanity access to God.

That the animals serve to bring knowledge of the deity to humanity is part of the inherently anthropocentric nature of these texts. Yet these two texts also push beyond anthropocentrism, showcasing the snake and donkey as subjects who act on their own accord. I contend that rather than being simple “personifications”—depicted, literally, like “persons”—the snake and the donkey share with each other a distinct portrayal that sets them apart from—even above—their human counterparts. The characteristically human ability of the donkey and snake to converse in words with Balaam and Eve, respectively, is not a narrative elevation of the animals from subhuman to human capacities, but rather depicts their closer affinities with the deity.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. BEYOND FABLES

Within both the Hebrew Bible and the corpus of ancient Near Eastern literature, the snake's dialogue with Eve and the donkey's interrogation of Balaam stand out as anomalous instances of discourse *between animals and humans* using human speech. Talking animals and even plants do appear with some frequency in ancient Near Eastern texts. Sumerian and Babylonian literature, for example, feature an entire subgenre known as *Streitfabeln*, or contest literatures, in which pairs of animals or plants verbally spar with each other over which of the two

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2. George Savran, in “Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass, and the Garden of Eden” *JSOT* 64 (1994): 33–55, has conducted an insightful intertextual examination of these two texts and the broader narratives of which they are a part. Savran recognizes that the snake and donkey both possess unique knowledge of the divine, that they transmit knowledge to humans via speech, and that the verbs of knowing and seeing are associated with the communication of knowledge in both stories. However, rather than regarding the episodes of animal speech as objects of study in themselves, Savran uses the similarities in the two animals' capacities for speech as part of a list of evidence for intertextual connections across the larger stories of the Garden of Eden (Gen 2–3) and Balaam the Seer (Num 22–24), focusing on the stories' thematic implications for the human community of Israel and its relationship with God. By contrast, deploying an ecological hermeneutic, as I am attempting to do here, amplifies the nonhuman voices of the story, making the animals and their speech independently worthy of analysis.

is superior.<sup>3</sup> It is rare, however, for the personifications in ancient Near Eastern literature to speak to human beings; most often they converse with each other or, in occasional instances, with deities. Only a few exceptions to this trend can be found, such as the Egyptian Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, in which the narrator, stranded on an island, is aided by a large snake who prophetically assures him that he will soon reach home again.<sup>4</sup>

The stories in Gen 3 and Num 22 can also be differentiated from other so-called fables in the Hebrew Bible featuring nonhuman talking protagonists.<sup>5</sup> In Judg 9:7–15, Jotham tells the story of trees who are searching among themselves for a king; in 2 Kgs 14:9–10, Jehoash responds to Amaziah's request for a meeting using an allegorical tale of a correspondence between a cedar and a thornbush. These two stories are not independent pieces of biblical narrative, but instead are placed in the mouths of other biblical characters. In Gen 3 and Num 22, the snake and the donkey are themselves indispensable elements of the primary narrative. No character recites a parable featuring the donkey or the snake, nor does a prophet use those figures as illustrations in an oracle. The snake and the donkey are biblical characters in their own right, further distinguishing them from any other ostensibly similar texts in the Hebrew Bible.

## 2. GENESIS 3

The Yahwistic creation story in Gen 2 sets the scene for the snake's dialogue with the woman. At Gen 2:25, both the male and female have now been created, and both are "naked" and "unashamed." In an oft-noted pun, the two human beings are *עֲרוּמִים*, naked, while the snake is *עָרוּם*, clever.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the snake is distinguished from its fellow "creatures of the field" (*חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה*) by being more clever than them all. Within Gen 2:25 and 3:1a, the snake is both set apart from other animals and affiliated with the woman and man via the *עָרוּם* pun. Yet it will later become clear that, though the snake is aligned more closely with

3. Ronald J. Williams, "The Fable in the Ancient Near East," in *A Stubborn Faith: Papers on Old Testament and Related Subjects Presented to Honor William Andrew Irwin* (ed. Edward C. Hobbs; Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1956), 5. Examples of contest literature include The Tamarisk and the Palm and The Ox and the Horse; they are included in W. G. Lambert, "Fables or Contest Literature," in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 150–212.

4. Miriam Lichtheim, "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor," in *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (vol. 1 of *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 211–15.

5. Cf. Ezek 17 and 19, in which plants and animals are protagonists but do not speak.

6. See, for example, the discussion of the pun's implications in Carol Newsom, "Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2–3," in Habel and Wurst, *The Earth Story in Genesis*, 60–72.

humanity than with other creatures, the snake's closest affiliation is actually with the divine being.

In the Yahwistic creation story, God creates the "creatures of the field" (הַשָּׂדֵה תַּיִת) only after creating the human being, placing the human in the garden, and articulating the rules governing the trees. The snake, as a creature of the field, is not present to hear God's admonition to the human regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The text is silent on how the snake comes to know that God has given such an injunction; nevertheless, the snake obviously knows something that God knows but the humans do not. In other words, the animal is somehow privy to a divine knowledge, while human beings know only what God tells them. The snake's first utterance is אַף כִּי־אָמַר אֱלֹהִים, "Did God say . . .?" or perhaps "Yea, God said . . ." Whether we take the snake's speech as a question or not, the snake is nonetheless about to restate a speech that, as far as the text reveals, it did not hear.

The description of the snake as עָרוּם points to the "cleverness" of the snake's rhetorical move. It does not really need the woman to set its knowledge straight; instead, it wishes to engage the woman in dialogue. The woman answers the snake's query without hesitation; a talking snake prompts no astonished exclamation from her. Nor does the text note anything extraordinary. The direct discourse is undertaken in a matter-of-fact way: "it [the snake] said to the woman . . .," "the woman said to the snake . . .," and "the snake said to the woman . . ." The dialogue passes back and forth between the two characters in simple, formulaic introductions, with the snake getting both the first and the last word.

The woman readily explains the discrepancy between what she understands God to have said and what the snake attributes to God. Notably, the woman also has not yet been created when God issues the directive about the tree, and her repetition of God's speech is by no means exact. She does not seem to know that the tree "in the middle of the garden" is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and she believes she will die merely by touching it—though God only mentioned eating its fruit as the cause of death. The snake corrects her, saying, "You will certainly not die! For God knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:4–5). The snake's speech mediates between the words of God and the knowledge of the woman; it is a source of revelation for the human beings even before eating the fruit opens their eyes. The snake knows—or, at the very least, correctly predicts—what the consequences of eating the fruit will be. The humans do not die on that day, and instead their eyes are opened (3:7). Furthermore, while the text depicts the humans' own understanding of their new knowledge as an awareness of their nakedness (3:7), God realizes that "the human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (3:22), an assessment that lines up exactly with the snake's prediction.

The snake clearly can discern the immediate consequences of the humans' eating the fruit. Less clear is whether the snake knows the long-term effects of

the action it initiates. The outcome of the snake's conversation incites God's anger against the snake, the woman, and the man. God now speaks curses, not conversation, to the three characters. Whereas the snake had been distinguished from the other creatures of the field by its cleverness, it now is distinguished from all such creatures by its state of being cursed. Rather than being partners in dialogue, the woman and the snake now will be enemies, engaging in physical assaults instead of verbal exchanges. If the snake intended to trick the woman into eating the fruit, then it must have known that its own downfall would be wrapped up in hers. If the snake sought some sort of positive consequence for the human couple, then it must have limits on its knowledge, since eating of the fruit brought curses rather than blessings. Or perhaps the snake was betrayed by the woman, who says to God, "The snake deceived me, and I ate" (Gen 3:13). The text suggests that the snake can predict God's behavior, but not the behavior of the humans. The human couple nevertheless expect imminent death at the hands of their creator because of their actions, despite the snake's declarations to the contrary.

Despite the text's ambiguity regarding the snake's motivations and the precise extent of its knowledge, an important point remains clear: the snake knows more about the ways of God than the humans do.

Moreover, the snake makes it possible for the human beings to acquire that knowledge. It is only after she converses with the snake that the woman is first able to *see*: "that the woman saw that the tree was good for eating, and that it was pleasing to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise" (verse 6). Then, having eaten the fruit, "the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew . . ." (verse 7). God's hidden truths become accessible to the human beings only because of the snake, making the snake an agent of divine revelation.

### 3. NUMBERS 22:21-35

The story of Balaam and his donkey opens with a discrepancy between what God says and what God does—as in Gen 2-3. Balaam, a renowned seer, has been summoned by Balak, king of the Moabites, to curse the Israelites camped on the plains of Moab. In a curious move for a non-Israelite prophet, Balaam insists upon consulting Yahweh before consenting to travel to Moab to perform the curse. God says to Balaam, "Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are blessed" (Num 22:12). Repeatedly Balaam refuses to accompany the Moabite elders to Moab, because Yahweh has prohibited the journey. Pressed by the messengers from Balak, Balaam seeks a message from God one last time. This time God grants permission for Balaam to go with the elders, saying, "If the men have come to meet you, arise, go with them, but only the thing I tell you to do will you do" (22:20). Obedient to the words from God, Balaam goes. Given the great care Balaam has taken to follow the will of God, the reader is astonished when the text then says, "God became angry because he was going" (22:22a). God has told Balaam to go on the journey, and yet God has become angry precisely because

Balaam has gone. The narrative provides no explanation for this reversal in God's will—it gives no reason why God might tell Balaam to do one thing, and then seek to kill him for his obedience.

The donkey first appears in the story in Num 22:21. Balaam's saddling the donkey is the only action that does not directly echo God's commandment. Balaam is told to "arise, go with them" (קוּם לְךָ אִתָּם); Balaam actually arises (וַיִּקָּם), saddles his donkey, and then goes with the messengers (וַיֵּלֶךְ עִם־שָׂרֵי מוֹאָב). As the one aspect of his preparation for the journey not directly reflected in God's commandment, Balaam's donkey stands conspicuously ready to interfere in one way or another with Balaam's attempt to do the will of God.

When the angel of Yahweh appears in the road as an adversary (לְשָׂטָן) to Balaam, the narrative again draws attention to the presence of the donkey, but also to the presence of two of Balaam's servants (Num 22:22). Like the elders of Moab, who are not mentioned again until the end of the pericope in verse 35, Balaam's servants promptly disappear from the narrative. Of all this company of travelers, only the donkey sees (וַתִּרְאֶה) the angel of Yahweh, sword in hand, standing in the road, and she<sup>7</sup> sees the angel all three times it appears. Balaam's blindness to God's messenger is particularly ironic, since he, a seer, has just engaged in direct conversation with God the night before he embarked on the journey. With each appearance of the angel, the donkey must take increasingly more drastic measures to avoid the angel's wrath, even injuring her rider and finally sitting down, refusing to go any farther. With each of the donkey's diversions, Balaam grows more angry, beating the donkey more severely each time, until finally the Lord opens the mouth of the donkey.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the snake's speech in Gen 3, here the donkey's ability to talk is attributed explicitly to God's intervention. Yet the donkey's speech is received by Balaam as no more extraordinary than the snake's conversation with Eve. The emphasis in both texts is not on the human characteristics that the animals display, but rather on the animals' abilities to see and know the ways of God when human beings cannot.

Like the snake, the donkey addresses her human companion interrogatively, but, as Savran notes, with "different rhetorical intent."<sup>9</sup> Whereas the narrator's description of the snake as עָרִים may suggest intent to deceive, no adjectives are attached to the donkey. Her words stand alone to convey her meaning to the reader and to Balaam. She asks Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have beaten me these three times?" Balaam's answer, in which he wishes for a

7. The Hebrew text uses אֵתוֹן, indicating a female donkey, hence the feminine pronouns.

8. For Coats, a fable, of which the Balaam's ass story is the exemplar, "describes a static situation." To the contrary, in this story I have observed an increasing tension leading to a denouement, rather than a static situation. See George W. Coats, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (TFOTL 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 10.

9. Savran, "Beastly Speech," 38–39.

sword to kill the donkey for making a fool of him, is as ironic as his blindness; he might have asked to borrow the angel's sword—were he aware of its presence. The donkey then deploys two rhetorical questions that by their nature do not require answers, though Balaam still feels compelled to give one inadequate reply. She asks him, "Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" Remarkably, rather than point to the fiery supernatural being blocking the road, the donkey appeals to the companionship—albeit a companionship forged through servitude—she and Balaam have shared. She puts her own subjectivity first, insisting that Balaam acknowledge the trust he owes her. Rather than serving as a folkloric convention that utters a few words to move the plot along, this talking animal is not only a character in its own right, but a self-aware, even "rounded" character. The fullness of the donkey's characterization at this point in the story contrasts with the deflation of Balaam's importance. Balaam's final, terse "no" (אֵל) in response to the donkey's questions is hardly worthy of a person who is expected to curse an entire people. Their conversation is, like the one between the woman and the snake, matter-of-fact in its presentation, yet extraordinary in its result.

Just as Yahweh has opened the mouth of the donkey, Yahweh also uncovers Balaam's eyes, but only after the donkey has spoken. Balaam's conversation with the donkey results in his ability to see the armed angel standing in the road; in the same way the conversation with the snake enables the woman to see the goodness of the tree.

But the interrogations are not yet over for Balaam. The angel of Yahweh asks nearly the same question that the donkey posed: "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times?" (Num 22:32). Before Balaam has a chance to revise his answer, the angel continues its address, explaining that the donkey's seeing and subsequent turning away have kept the angel from killing Balaam. The donkey, incidentally, seems never to have been in danger; the angel claims that it would have let the donkey live even had it slain Balaam (22:33). This talking animal emerges from her conversation with her human companion unscathed, and if she perceived danger before the angel spoke, she now learns that Balaam was the one who should have been wary.

#### 4. KNOWING AND SEEING

Genesis 3 and Num 22 end with different fates for the human and nonhuman characters. The snake is cursed and Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden. Both Balaam and his donkey, on the other hand, survive their encounter with the messenger.

The presence of a talking animal by no means guarantees a happy ending for human or nonhuman animal; it does, however, guarantee some change in a human being's ability to know or to see. While this effect on the human reflects an inherent anthropocentrism in the texts, it also shows that the animals



possess faculties that the humans do not—faculties that equip the animals to be messengers of God. For the animals to appear only as servants of *human* needs would be an unmitigated anthropocentrism. For them to be presented as agents of *divinity* is another matter.

Shemaryahu Talmon notes that revelations of God to humanity in biblical narratives often involve one or more of the verbs גלה, ראה, and ידע. Source critics attempt to categorize the nature of God's revelation according to different sources' uses of these verbs, proposing, for example, that where the Yahwist uses ראה for theophanies, the Priestly writer substitutes ידע at some instances, particularly those involving Moses.<sup>10</sup> Talmon resists this kind of strict categorization, pointing instead to numerous instances where two of the three verbs occur in parallel lines. Moreover, as Talmon points out, all three of the verbs are sometimes used together, such as in an introduction to an oracle delivered by one of our characters of note, Balaam: "An utterance of Balaam son of Beor, an utterance of the man of open eye, an utterance of one who hears the words of God, and knows (יִדְעַ) the knowledge of the Most High; the vision of *Shaddai* he sees (רָאָה = יִתְּוֹהַ) who falls down, yet his eyes are uncovered (וְגִלּוֹי)" (Num 24:15–16).<sup>11</sup> Regardless of whether they can be separated by source—and they cannot be in this poem—these verbs of seeing, knowing, and uncovering all are clearly associated with God's revelations to humanity.

When Yahweh opens Balaam's eyes in Num 22:31, the verb is גלה. It connotes the removal of some covering, as though Balaam might normally have been able to discern angels in the road, but that ability has been temporarily obscured. As soon as Balaam's eyes are opened, he is able to *see* (ראה) the angel in the road, as his donkey has long been able to do. Balaam's response to the angel attributes his sin to not *knowing* (יִדְעַ), having just been indicted by the donkey and the angel for his failure to see. The presence of these three verbs emphasizes the revelatory nature of Balaam's rediscovered vision. Vision and knowledge are conflated: thanks to the donkey's vision, Balaam also acquires again both his prophetic vision and his knowledge of God's will.

Vision and knowledge are similarly synthesized in Gen 3:1–7. By communicating God's hidden knowledge to the human being, the snake already begins the process of eye-opening. Upon hearing the snake's clarification of God's statements regarding the tree, "the woman saw (וַתִּרְאֶה) that the tree was good for eating, and that it was pleasing to the eyes . . ." (3:6). The fruit appeals to the woman's eyes, newly opened to the tree's pleasures. Moreover, before talking with the snake, the woman had not been able to "see" that the tree was good; the ability to know good is a promised consequence of eating the fruit, but even simple

10. Rolf Rendtorff, quoted in Shemaryahu Talmon, "Revelation in Biblical Times," *HS* 26 (1985): 53–70.

11. See Talmon, "Revelation in Biblical Times," 59.

knowledge of the true consequences introduces knowledge of good, described as an ability to see. Unlike Balaam, who has his eyes uncovered, the two first humans have their eyes opened, with the implication that they are acquiring for the first time the kind of sight enabling them to know (יָדַע) as God knows. They now become closer to God in a way that the snake, able to speak God's hidden truth to the humans, had already been.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By infusing the snake and donkey with the human characteristics of dialogue and speech, the narrative renders the realm of God's revelation accessible to the human characters. Beyond being merely a folkloric convention, personification in Gen 3:1-7 and Num 22:21-35 gives unique direction to the narrative. The talking animals allow Eve and Balaam to see that to which they previously were blinded, and with new sight comes new knowledge. Before the animals address their human companions, the first humans can neither see the goodness of the tree nor know the true consequences of eating its fruit. Balaam cannot know that God is angry with him for journeying to Moab (however capricious that anger may seem), nor can he see the angel blocking his path.

After conversing with the snake and the donkey, Eve and Balaam themselves acquire revelatory sight and knowledge of divine will. Thus the snake and donkey are revealed as mediators of divine revelation, possessing a closer relationship to God than their human counterparts. The texts' anthropocentrism, while still present, is mitigated by the privileging of the animals' revelatory agency over that of the humans.<sup>7</sup>

These two instances of animals talking with human speech cannot be said to comprise a unique genre, since there are no other biblical texts featuring animal personification with which to compare them. Nevertheless, this phenomenon operates in a very particular manner in Gen 3 and Num 22: the talking donkey and snake make God's revelation visible and comprehensible to humanity.

Yet the agency of these animals does not stop at the betterment of human beings. Instead, retrieving the voices of the snake and donkey from the obscurity of literary convention reveals that these two biblical animals exhibit far greater affinities with the deity than with their human counterparts who, by listening to the voices of the snake and the donkey, can hear the voice of God.