

Stone, "Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies"

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Focus on Laudato Si'

Volume 34, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060961ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1060961ar>

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Publisher(s)

Athabasca University Press

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Cite this review

Wright, J. (2018). Review of [Stone, "Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies"]. *The Trumpeter*, 34 (1), 212–214. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1060961ar>

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Book Review

Stone, Ken. *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*. Stanford University Press, 2018.

In a time when many might accuse the Hebrew Bible of promoting human exploitative dominion over animals, Ken Stone's *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies* provides a refreshing lens with which to focus upon the animals populating the text. Due to the distortion of the significance of animals caused by contemporary anthropocentric assumptions about biblical literature, Stone suggests a reading strategy that intentionally takes an opposite approach, drawing on animal studies, as a counterbalance.

Stone's methodology is aligned with an "animal turn" in the humanities and social sciences. Animal studies is a heterogeneous body of writing about animals, encompassing the zoological and ethological fields associated with animal biology, behaviour, and cognition, literary and culture studies, philosophy and philosophical ethics, history, sociology, and anthropology. Stone acknowledges the potential difficulties involved in the methodological pluralism of animal studies when attempting to bring it to bear on the field of biblical studies; however, he insists on using the phrase "animal studies," acknowledging that he uses it in his book "to refer to diverse styles of reading and analysis rather than a single methodological approach" (14). Stone's scavenger methodology leads him to draw on thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Matthew Calarco, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Johnathan Klawans, Adrian Franklin, Barbara King, Frans de Waal, Jane Goodall, Holmes Rolston III, Thom van Dooren, Aaron Gross, and others—drawing together biblical, literary, and animal studies.

The present monograph aims to suggest that contemporary animal studies can prove useful to Hebrew Bible readers who wish to reconsider the significance of animals to and within the text. This is achieved by re-examining sections of the Bible in dialogue with the resources or questions of animal studies. The first chapter serves to set up the main arguments of the book, many of which appear in greater depth in later chapters. Stone begins by addressing the role of animal skins in the process of canonisation. He then outlines three emphases within contemporary animal studies to which he returns throughout the book: (1) Donna Haraway's concept of "companion species," (2) destabilising the human/animal binary, and (3) associations between species difference and differences among humans. Regarding this third emphasis, Stone refers to Derrida's neologism "carnophallogocentrism," a term connecting phallogocentric authority with the literal or symbolic ingestion of animal flesh, to navigate these differences. Chapter two considers the dogs of Exodus (chapters 11 and 22) to study the issue of boundaries that the biblical dogs blur. This study shows that while the Hebrew Bible does draw distinctions between humans and animals, it also blurs such distinctions, as well as

pluralising the concept of “the animal.” In chapter three, Stone turns to sacrifice, using Derrida’s study of the Chimera. According to Stone, sacrificial practices complicate boundaries between produce, animal, and human, as well as complicating the traditional boundaries between animal, human, and God—causing God to seem, variously, anthropomorphised and zoomorphised.

Using the story of Balaam’s donkey and its history of interpretation, Stone considers animal hermeneutics and animal ethics in chapter four. Stone approaches Balaam’s donkey in three ways—placing it among ancient donkeys, the Bible’s extraordinary animals, and subjugated equines—all leading toward an ethical consideration, studying Balaam’s donkey among animals who deserve compassion. Chapter five focuses explicitly on the wild animals of the Bible, considering its “zoological gaze.” Here, Stone spends time studying passages that reveal the destructiveness of predators, the animals that are associated with the desolate wilderness to which a city might be returned, and the beautiful and ferocious creatures found in passages such as Job 38-41 and Psalm 104. Stone argues that our ways of reading the Bible run the risk of “domesticating the Bible’s wild and ferocious God” (139). In chapter six, Stone addresses the idea that animals might be considered religious subjects rather than objects. Although Stone does not attempt to correlate biblical literature with modern science in any literalising sense, he helpfully asks whether primatological studies of morality, animal meaning, and spirituality, along with writings by religious studies scholars who take seriously animals and animal religion, can be useful in “reshaping the hermeneutical imagination that readers of the Bible bring to biblical texts” (155). In his final chapter, Stone asks what it means to read the Bible during an age of extinction. He argues that story, place, and species survival are intertwined, such that we must learn to tell different and better stories involving multiple species in particular places so as to foster a more habitable multispecies world. This means retelling the Bible’s story in ways that emphasise the interdependence of our lives with those of other animals, rather than reaffirming human exceptionalism.

In his introduction, Ken Stone claims he is offering “an invitation . . . to attend to the Bible’s animals in dialogue with animal studies” (19). This is indeed what he has delivered in the present monograph. Stone not only brings new insights to the reading of the Hebrew Bible, but he also helps those who may wish to use this scriptural text to create a well-nuanced, faith-based platform for animal activism that, simultaneously, values methodological multiplicity and plurality. Stone brings disciplines together in a manner that is neither superficial nor impeded by the polyvocality of each; Stone’s interdisciplinary work is both rich and accessible. While ecological and environmental approaches to the Bible are not new within the dialogue between science and religion, Stone’s focused dialogue between the Hebrew Bible and animal studies brings literary and critical theory into the interdisciplinary conversation, as well, thus providing a book well worth reading, not only for its fresh ideas, but also for its methodological insight.

Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies is highly recommended to those interested in how a dialogue between science and religion can be carried out in today's society.

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