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Contents

Part 1
Beginnings

Humanity at Its Limits

Jennifer L. Koosed

What does it mean to be human? We are poised somewhere in between animals and divinities; aided, enhanced, and altered by technologies; changing and changed by our environments, both natural and cultural. Arguably, the Bible begins as a speciesist manifesto—only humanity is created in the image of the divine, only humanity is given dominion over the rest of creation. However, the Bible also contains multiple moments of disruption, boundary crossing, and category confusion: animals speak, God becomes man, spirits haunt the living, and monsters confound at the end. All of these stories explore the boundaries of the human in ways that destabilize the very category of the human. All of these stories engage thinking that broadly falls under the umbrella term *posthumanism*—a catchall of disputed definition that points beyond various human-centric ideologies.

As defined by Peter Singer, speciesism "is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (2009, 6).[1] In his groundbreaking book *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975, Singer presents what he calls "a short history of speciesism" in Western culture, which begins at the beginning—the creation accounts in Genesis. Focusing on the passages where God gives man dominion over the earth (Gen 1:29; 9:2–3) as well as the parts of the story where animals are killed (God clothing Eve and Adam with animal skins, Abel's sacrifice of sheep, the "collateral damage" of the animals in humanity's punishment through flood), Singer roots the ideology of human exceptionalism in biblical mythology. Even though he acknowledges that there is an undercurrent of compassion in the Hebrew Scriptures better understood as stewardship rather than dominion, he

1. Although popularized by Singer, Singer himself attributes the term to Richard Ryder (2009, 257 n. 4).

does conclude that "there is no serious challenge to the overall view, laid down in Genesis, that the human species is the pinnacle of creation and has God's permission to kill and eat other animals" (188). In this, Singer is in agreement with Lynn White Jr.'s equally influential article on the environmental crisis that also points the finger unflinchingly at the biblical tradition with special attention to Genesis (1967).

Although Singer later acknowledges that the biblical Scripture and the traditions that grow out of it may be even more complex than he initially thought (2006, 616), most thinkers still begin with the biblical commands to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth, and to have dominion over it, in addition to the ontological distinction that accompanies these commands—that only men and women are created in the image of the divine. Without excusing these verses and the ways in which their interpretations have certainly contributed to speciesist ideas and actions, other thinkers have complicated this story of origins as they have complicated the Genesis accounts themselves.

All of the essays in this volume underscore the complexity of biblical texts and traditions; many draw on Jacques Derrida's equally complex reading of Genesis's creation stories in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Derrida focuses his attention on the second creation story, specifically the scene where a naked Adam names the animals (2008, 15–18). The image of a man naked before the animals is a reflection of Derrida's own naked encounter. One day, stepping out of the shower, he is startled to find his cat looking at him. In his own shame, Derrida is taken back to a time before shame, even before time, when Adam stood naked before all other animals, under the watch of a God supervising but also surprised. Further, this particular encounter becomes the incident that initiates a meditation about the relationship between human and nonhuman animals with particular attention to the ways in which the history of philosophy has defined the nonhuman animal as other. All that humanity is—reasonable, intelligent, communicative—is all that the animal is not. Animals lack *logos*, the ability to respond, even the ability to die. Or, at least, so say the philosophers who Derrida interrogates, from Descartes to Kant, from Levinas to Heidegger. Throughout his critique of the philosophical tradition, Derrida returns again and again to his cat in order to highlight its particularity: "I must immediately make it clear, the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, *a little cat*" (6).

Not all of his readers have been so taken with Derrida's *petite chat*. Donna Haraway, while acknowledging her great debt to Derrida and his

decisive critique of the Western philosophical tradition, finds his encounter with his cat quite disappointing. Despite the fact that he does repeat his desire to focus on the singularity of his cat and not transform her into a sign or figure or allegory, to take her point of view seriously without appropriating it, Haraway argues that he fails the simple test of curiosity (2008, 20). He wonders about his cat but never actually researches what her experience could be. Perhaps Derrida spent too much time thinking about Adam, naked before all of the animals, and not enough time considering the example of Eve, curious before the snake.

Haraway pursues her own biblical beginnings, not with Genesis but with one Christian appropriation of Genesis, the Gospel of John. For her, the *logos* becoming flesh is not the ultimate sign of the special status of the human being; rather, the *logos* became *flesh*, not just man:

> Sign and flesh; story and fact. In my natal house, the generative partners could not separate. They were, in down-and-dirty dog talk, tied. No wonder culture and nature imploded for me as an adult. And nowhere did that implosion have more force than in living the relationship and speaking the verb that passes as a noun: companion species. Is this what John meant when he said, "The Word was made flesh"? (2003, 18)

Rather than reifying our differences and distinctions, in this moment, all flesh is collapsed into divinity, all language (reason, logic) is collapsed into bodies, all nature is collapsed into culture. These are not mergings and meldings that obliterate difference; instead, they complicate our categories through border crossings and borrowings. She signals this collapse that does not negate difference in the use of the term *natureculture*s. Her manifesto ends, "The word is made flesh in mortal natures" (100).[2]

Of the making of genealogies, there is no end. Animal studies represents only one strand of posthumanist thinking. Other possible points of origin include the various technological innovations (like cybernetics) and their associated theoretical models, which emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s, "that removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition" (Wolfe 2010, xii); or Michel Foucault's concluding paragraphs in *The Order of Things,* where he declares, "As the archaeol-

2. For various explorations of the boundary breakdown between nature and culture, see also Haraway 1991 and 2008.

ogy of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (1971, 387; see Wolfe 2010, xii); or Derrida's deconstruction, notions of the trace and hauntology (more on this later idea will follow); or Slavoj Žižek's channeling of Lacan in his articulation of the relationship between the Symbolic and the Real; or … for readers who are not yet weary, I direct them to Cary Wolfe's work from the first time he used the term in the essay "In Search of Post-humanist Theory" (1995) to his latest post-hyphen, posthumanist exploration *What Is Post-humanism?* (2010).

Philosophers and ethicists have been addressing issues of animals and humans, specters and divinities, for decades. Peter Singer's work has been focused on the relationship between humans and animals since the 1970s; Donna Haraway first explored the intersections of human and machine in the 1980s and has recently turned her attention to the intersections of human and animal; much of Jacques Derrida's later work (some posthumously published) addresses specters, animals, and divinities. Many other theorists have built upon these foundational works and animal studies, posthumanism, and hauntology are widely explored in philosophy and literary theory. Various religious studies scholars (in ethics, theology, comparative religions, history of religions) have also engaged these ideas, especially incorporating animal studies into their own research.[3] However, these ideas have just now been filtering into biblical studies. Many of the essays in this volume first were presented over the course of a few years during annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature. These initial experimental forays into reading the Bible in light of posthumanism have developed into this volume. *The Bible and Posthumanism* addresses a variety of approaches and perspectives, serves as an introduction to the hermeneutical power of these theories, and thus acts as an invitation to further work.

Hannah M. Strømmen opens the volume with an essay that further explores some of the introductory issues I have raised here. She too notes that philosophers and ethicists often begin by blaming the Bible for the subjugation of animals. She too reflects upon Derrida's encounter with his cat and his meditations on the biblical creation stories. Strømmen makes no attempt to exonerate the biblical text, but through a reading of another biblical beginning—the renewal of the world in Gen 9—she seeks

3. The American Academy of Religion's Consultation on Animals and Religion began in 2003.

to complicate the question of biblical blame. Denise Kimber Buell's essay also offers an introduction to the issues. Whereas much of this volume addresses questions that arise when we look at the nonhuman animal, Buell's essay focuses on another aspect of posthumanism: immaterial entities and hauntology. As Buell explains, *hauntology* is a term coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994) to account for the ways in which the past effects the present and opens up the future. The Bible, as a document that presupposes the reality of spiritual forces and human interaction with these forces, is primarily concerned with entities beyond the human (angels, demons, deities). The New Testament especially is full of "haunts." But Buell's use of hauntology also traces how certain ideas "haunt" New Testament studies, like nineteenth-century spiritualism. Buell deftly explores these multiple levels of haunting, in order to ultimately address issues of agency and responsibility. Strømmen and Buell work in tandem to introduce many of the major issues in posthumanism in general and this volume in particular.

From little cats to the king of cats, the volume's second part is about lions roaming through the wild, in the Bible, in ancient Near Eastern texts and contexts, and in philosophy. Hugh Pyper examines the lion as a metaphor for the biblical sovereign, both human and divine. Unlike most other ancient Near Eastern cultures, Israel rarely identified its kings with the lion, reserving such figuration for its God. In addition to engaging Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Pyper also uses *The Beast and the Sovereign* to explore the political and existential ramifications of a God, beast and Lord, who creates a humanity, caught in between both. Ken Stone is also concerned with philosophy as he brings Balaam's ass (Num 22) into conversation with Wittgenstein's lion. Beginning with Wittgenstein's quip in *Philosophical Investigations*, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him," Stone explores a range of interspecies communication, not just communication between human and animal, but between God and all creatures. Conversation is not always a panacea, but refusing to engage in dialogue leads to violence, and is a form of violence itself.

The next section examines the human body in the places where it is invaded, possessed, goes mad. Each paper addresses the interrelatedness of the psychic and the somic—bodies in pain are minds in crises and vice versa. Each paper regards the body not as a stable, bounded entity but one that is in constant flux, penetrated and penetrating: opening up to God is opening up to love is opening up to madness. Heidi Epstein reads a musical rendition of the Song of Songs in a film about possession: Michal

Waszinski's 1937 movie adaptation of Ansky's play *The Dybbuk* (written between 1912 and 1917 and subtitled *Between Two Worlds*). She explores the meanings of bodies, masculine and feminine, natural and supernatural, divine and demonic, alluring and grotesque. Rhiannon Graybill continues the conversation about possession and madness as she discusses the book of Ezekiel and Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903). In Schreber's memoir, he describes God possessing his body, transforming it. Once again, we see somebody "between two worlds"—masculine and feminine, natural and supernatural, divine and demonic, alluring and grotesque. Schreber's prophetic experience lends insight into Ezekiel's. George Aichele's subject Lars is also poised between the two worlds of sanity and insanity. In the movie *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), Lars buys a life-sized sex doll (Bianca) and believes that she is his girlfriend. Together, Bianca and Lars inhabit a contact zone (to borrow language from Haraway); they are not just human-technological comminglings, but they are also natural-supernatural transformations. As Graybill argues that Schreber's experiences should not just be understood psychoanalytically but also theologically, Aichele proposes that a purely psychological reading of the movie misses its theological dimensions, as Bianca is also Mark's Jesus, neither human nor nonhuman but somehow posthuman, and Lars, his family, and his entire community are transformed through her life, her love, and her death.

Consideration of human anthropology in Christian community brings us to the fourth part of this volume: Fathers. The two essays in this section explore early Christianity's engagement with biblical texts, both gnostic and orthodox, and the ways in which their understanding of the human is defined through interaction with both "spiritual" bodies in one essay and "animal" bodies in the other. Building on his previous work, Benjamin Dunning focuses on Valentinian interpretations of creation myths. He suggests that within their tripartite anthropologies, the concepts usually associated with immateriality (*pneuma* and *psychē*) also have material dimensions. Rather than neatly dividing into material and nonmaterial parts, Dunning demonstrates the internal fissures and ambiguous borders of these "heretical" definitions of the human. Eric Daryl Meyer reads Gregory of Nyssa reading the Song of Songs, and we return to Derrida's analysis of the human-animal distinction in philosophical discourse. As philosophers strive to transcend the animal and yet ultimately "fail" to do so, Gregory of Nyssa endeavors to distinguish between human and animal, spirit and matter, literal and analogical meanings in ways that ultimately collapse the categories.

In these two essays, we are poised between the angels and the animals, but also enmeshed in them in complex and constantly shifting ways.

The role of sacrifice in delineating the categories of animal, human, and divine is the subject of part 5. Robert Paul Seesengood opens this section by reflecting on the commonality established between human and nonhuman animals through the biblical understanding of blood, and the consequent ambiguity in some passages concerning the morality of animal killing. Meat, in at least some circumstances as understood by some Jews and even some early Christians, is murder. Seesengood explores this issue in order to open up an even broader conversation about humanity and animality, flesh and word, sacrifice and slaughter. Taking the knife from Seesengood, Yvonne Sherwood uses it to cut deeper into the history of sacrifice and into the scholarship on sacrifice. Ranging widely through the works of contemporary and classical philosophers, historians, Christian and Jewish theologians and biblical interpreters, anthropologists, colonial explorers, and science writers, Sherwood weaves a variegated essay that addresses the ways in which sacrifice (in practice and in text) establishes our most fundamental categories of identity and undermines them at the same time.

The last essay by Stephen Moore takes us to the end of the world where we find a God-Man in the form of a slaughtered (though still alive) Lamb: humanity, divinity, and animality again converge in ways both strange and familiar. Moore finds an apocalypse both full of animals (figuratively) and empty of animals (in reality), which leads to an analysis of the sacrificial logic of the book of Revelation.

These last three essays especially interrogate the ethics of the human use of animals and the biblical contributions to the question.

Cited specifically in Stone's essay, but also operating as an undercurrent in most of the other contributions, Wolfe suggests, "our stance toward the animal is an index for how we stand in a field of otherness and difference generally" (2003, 5). How we think about and how we act toward the animal (or better: the *animals* in all of their infinite variety and multiplicity)[4] brings us back to ourselves, but not in a way that once again obliterates the animal. Animals are at the core of who we are and how we think: they are in us, and they are us. And their plurality, our plurality, stuns. Our ability to confine and define falters. How do I even

4. Derrida uses the French portmanteau *l'animot* to disrupt the violence the singular "animal" does to the "heterogeneous multiplicity of the living" (2008, 31; cf. 41).

think about myself apart from the 90 percent of "me" composed of various microbes; how do I understand any fundamental notion of identity if I cannot even draw an unambiguous line between "me" and "not-me" within my very body (see Haraway 2008, 3–4)? Not only has "the boundary between human and animal [been] thoroughly breached," but also "machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial" (Haraway 1991, 151–52). The categories of life are impossible to delineate with clarity and surety: human, animal, plant, organic, inorganic, living, dead. The difference between a rock and the boy who throws it may be so obvious as to vitiate the need for definition; the difference between a tree and the monkey who climbs it may be evident; but what about a sponge?

The sponge actually lives in the borderlands between single-celled organisms organized as a colony (like blue-green algae) and the most primitive of multicellular animals. It spends most of its life as a single organism, a division of labor distributed throughout its different cells: collar cells, skin cells, interior cells, skeletal cells. Yet if the sponge is disintegrated, even down to its single cells, it does not die:

> The single cells, now freed from their association, began to look and behave like amoebae. They extended little lobes and moved along the glass surface. But before long a remarkable process began to take place. Whenever two single cells approached each other they extended filaments and touched; then they promptly united into a single body. A third cell was quickly added, then another and another, making a small mass. Separate nearby masses united, producing large colonies and eventually one single assembly that formed a crust on the surface of the slide. In the space of a few hours or days the aggregate had regenerated itself, and then differentiation began, producing the four different varieties of sponge cell. The tubular structure was built, the skeleton, the middle body, and the skin. (Young 1986, 99–100)[5]

Each individual cell carries within it the organization of all the others, and it can change and morph depending upon its circumstances. How it does this is a great mystery. Rather than demonstrating difference and hierarchy, Aristotle's Great Chain of Being may instead indicate something else. The Great Chain of Being is more like a web, each species connected and interdependent, each more sophisticated than assumed, each a world of

5. Young is describing an experiment conducted by the biologist H. V. Wilson.

wonder. Instead of finding divinity at the apex of the chain, perhaps it is spread through and across the web. Perhaps God is a sponge. Perhaps her name is Amanda.

In James Morrow's novel *Only Begotten Daughter*, the messiah returns in the body of a girl, conceived in a test tube with sperm but no ovum, grown in a glass womb. As Julie Katz tries to make sense of her origins and abilities, she finds solace in only one place—at the bottom of the ocean, in the company of a sponge named Amanda. Later as a middle-aged woman, stripped of her divinity but still inspiring, Julie Katz is crucified. In the final act, a sponge is lifted to her lips. But instead of vinegar or water, the sponge has been soaked in hemlock. The sponge itself, then, transforms the poison into tetradotoxin, which produces the symptoms of death without death and consequently saves Julie's life. Julie awakens to find this very same sponge carefully cleaning out her wounds. She is confused:

> — Some would say the miracle was entirely my own doing, Amanda notes. You were always so kind to me, so I paid you back: Androcles and the Lion, right? But that strikes me as a hopelessly romantic and anthropomorphic view of a sponge's priorities. Others would call the whole thing a gigantic biochemical coincidence: under optimal conditions, sponges will metabolize hemlock into tetradotoxin. I am not persuaded. Still others would claim that God herself entered into me and performed the appropriate alchemy. A plausible argument, but rather boring. Then there is a final possibility, my favorite.
>
> — Yes?
>
> — The final possibility is that I'm God. (Morrow 1990, 309)

Amanda continues: "Years ago, I told you sponges cannot be fatally dismembered, for each part quickly becomes the whole. To wit, I am both immortal and infinite" (309).

Humanity has its limits. When we are dismembered, it is fatal. We are neither immortal nor infinite. When we touch another animal (my dog is asleep at my feet); when we incorporate technology into our bodies and into our identities (I extend outward, tapping on a keyboard to transform my thoughts into digital impulses that will later be stamped onto the fiber of trees so that you can hold this part of me now in your hands); when we move beyond our bodies to consider spirits demonic and divine (my bedroom dresser knocks loudly in the night, the transoms move without

warning)—then we are at the end. A threshold has been reached, but that is where all thinking begins. This volume is an expedition to the multiple frontiers of the human, all of which should prompt us to ask not only, What does it mean to be human? but also, What should it mean?

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