

# Animals of the Bible from A to Z

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PUBLICATIONS

A

is for the animals  
that God declared are good.



B

is for the bear

that learns to be a better neighbor.



A large, stylized, dark red letter 'C' with a slight shadow effect, positioned on the left side of the image.

is for the camel  
that can't fit through narrow places.



D

is for the dog that walked  
the road with young Tobias.





# PAGES FOR GROWNUPS

Welcome to the back of the book. Here grownups will find help in locating the animals of the Bible found in these pages. Some animals are from familiar Bible stories and need no introduction. Others may be trickier to pinpoint or entirely unfamiliar. Parents, grandparents, and teachers may appreciate suggestions on using these animal stories in the religious education of children. Both Scripture citations and sample lessons to learn are included here.

It must be admitted up front that the vast majority of animals in the Bible wind up in two predictable situations: as someone's dinner or religious sacrifice. We would like to say that "no animals were harmed in the pages of this book," but alas, it would not be true to history or to the story of salvation to present biblical animals as simply pets or merry wild beasts. This is not Disneyland – though at least one snake and one donkey do have the power of speech in Scripture.

Still, we have worked hard not to turn this into a cookbook or how-to manual for burnt offerings. Certainly thousands of animals are sacrificed in the Bible, to which no one objected at the time. God, however, does log some weariness about the whole business of holocaust offerings (see 1 Samuel 15:22; Ecclesiastes 4:17; Isaiah 66:3-4; Hosea 6:6). In the New Testament, Jesus sums up God's disillusionment with ritual sacrifice by saying, "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13; see also 12:7). Animal lovers of all ages must cheer at these lines.

The fish and quail here stand in for the dinner-table animals – although these particular specimens are too cute to eat, don't you think? The pigs are happily off the menu in pork-avoiding Israel, but they certainly do not fare well at the end of the story they illustrate. Yet here they seem quite pleased to serve Jesus, even at great personal cost. This makes them better disciples than some of us. The goat and the yearling lamb, each in its own way, bear the weighty responsibility of representing the entire tradition of those sacrificed for the failings of the people – including the Lamb of God himself. Otherwise, the rest of our animals were chosen for their ability to highlight a virtue, symbolize a desirable characteristic, or warn of wickedness. All twenty-six animals share one theme, in that each does God's will – and often more perfectly than we do.

Most of all, we're just having some fun here, and we hope you do too. The best kind of religious education comes about through sneaky catechesis, when we never suspect we're supposed to be learning something. For those who want solid church teaching about our relationship to the animal kingdom, check out the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2415-2418.

## A is for the animals that God declared are good.

CITATION: *Genesis, chapter 1*, the story of creation.  
Also see *Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, verses 9-16*, Peter's vision.

LESSONS TO LEARN: *Original blessing. Ecology.*

The creation story is primarily about "original blessing." Some of us learned to equate the creation of the world with original sin, since close upon the heels of creation comes the first act of human disobedience. We may forget that God's intent was to create a *good* place of peace, kindness, and cooperation. Some of us may also have inherited the idea that the material world itself is bad, but God doesn't see it that way. Peter's vision in Acts is a divine reminder that human beings often call things "unclean," but God declares the natural world "clean." We have a responsibility to keep creation clean and healthy, too!

## B is for the bear that learns to be a better neighbor.

CITATION: *Isaiah, chapter 11, verses 6-9*, the oracle of the peaceable kingdom.

LESSONS TO LEARN: *The Kingdom of God. Peace.*  
*The spiritual fruit of self-control.*

Bears are described as dangerous beasts in the Bible. We have only to consider the story of Elisha and the heckling boys (in 2 Kings 2:23-25) to see how feared they were! Of the many references to biblical bears, the one in Isaiah's prophecy of the peaceable kingdom shows us how docile even these creatures might be in the better realm God has in mind for us. The bear that learns how to be neighbors with the cow is an example of how we might all learn to be better neighbors – despite our sometimes ferocious natures. A lesson on the nine spiritual fruits (from Galatians 5:22-23) could follow.

## C is for the camel that can't fit through narrow places.

CITATION: *Luke, chapter 18, verses 24-39*, the teaching on riches; repeated in *Mark, chapter 10, verses 17-31*.

LESSONS TO LEARN: *Possessions vs. a rich heart. The capital sin of greed.*

We all love stuff – and like the man who comes to Jesus, we spend a considerable part of our lives trying to acquire more of it. But none of our possessions can follow us out of this world. In fact, the more we fasten our hearts on stuff, the harder it may be to let our possessions go. We need our hands and hearts free to hold on to what's truly important – like the hands of the people we are given to love. An exploration of the capital (deadly) sins – pride, jealousy, anger, laziness, greed, gluttony, and obsessive desire – and how they harm our ability to love might spring from this lesson. Like the camel learns, you really can't take it with you.

## D is for the dog that walked the road with young Tobias.

CITATION: *Tobit, chapter 6, verse 2, and chapter 11, verse 4*, taking the journey of faith.

LESSONS TO LEARN: *Loyalty. Trust in God. Angel guardians.*

Biblical animals are rarely depicted as pets. Dogs have a particularly nasty reputation, and most references to dogs are intended as insults. Just recall when Jesus says to the woman, "It is not right to take the food meant for children and give it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27; Matthew 15:26). In *Tobit*, a story originating outside of Israel, the more familiar image of a boy and his dog comes to life. With an ailing father behind him and an uncertain journey ahead, Tobias needs companions to help him find his way. The dog provides the assurances of home, while his other companion turns out to be a guardian angel.

## E is for the elephants that fought in many battles.

CITATION: *1 Maccabees, chapter 6, verses 30-37*, an enemy king attacks Israel.

LESSONS TO LEARN: *Free will. God's power vs. worldly power.*

Unlike people who can freely consider and choose their actions, animals rely on instinct. This is why humans are given dominion over the earth's creatures, to provide stewardship and wise discernment. Animals are used as beasts of burden, as co-workers with the farmer, and sometimes as weapons of mass destruction in wartime. Elephants from Asia were trained as fearsome warriors against the armies of Israel, but could not defeat the people loyal to God. In another story, Pharaoh's chariot horses proved no match against God's power, which leads to the saying, "A vain hope for safety is the horse" (Psalms 20:8; 33:16-17; Hosea 1:7).

## F is for the fish that broke the nets, there were so many.

CITATION: *Luke, chapter 5, verses 1-11*, and also *John, chapter 21, verses 1-11*, stories of the abundant catch; see also *Ezekiel chapter 47, verse 10*.

LESSONS TO LEARN: *God can do what we can't. The mission of the church.*

Fishing all night, with nothing to show for it. We all know how it feels when our hard work seems wasted and frustrated. Then Jesus comes along and suddenly, anything's possible – even the impossible! Sometimes we may think our efforts have led to failure, but God can bring fruitfulness from failure in the blink of an eye. This is a good lesson in God's generous abundance, but also a reminder that what seems a waste of time to us may reap a great harvest in God's sweet time. The great catch of fish also serves as a promise that God will bless the work of the church with divine as well as human power. We don't have to rely solely on what we can do. God can always do more.