

Animals of the Bible (6) Apes and Monkeys



*Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine.*

I wonder if, like me, you remember reciting in your schooldays those lines from John Masefield's poem, "Cargoes"? Masefield's inspiration for that verse came from 1 Kings 10: 22, which in the Authorised Version reads "... once in three years came the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks." The same words are repeated in 2 Chronicles 9: 21, the only other place where apes are referred to in the Bible.

Ophir is mentioned in the same chapters, but nobody is sure where it was. One suggestion is that it was somewhere in India or Sri Lanka. In the Tamil language spoken in both these countries the names for apes, ivory and peacocks are similar to those in Hebrew. It may well be that the people of Solomon's kingdom imported the names along with the other treasures. Their ships would have travelled southwards through the Red Sea and eastwards across the Indian Ocean to trade with these lands.

The animals mentioned in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles were almost certainly not true Asian apes like orangutans or gibbons, but monkeys like the Indian rhesus or langur. *Kophim*, the

Hebrew word for “apes” is a general term which also includes monkeys. In fact, some modern translations of the Bible read “apes and monkeys” rather than “apes and peacocks.” Presumably they were brought to be kept as pets or a status symbol for the wealthy. Some people keep exotic animals for similar reasons today.

Neither monkeys nor apes were native to the Biblical lands, but no doubt the Israelites knew of these creatures quite early in their history, for the nearby Egyptians kept several kinds of monkeys. They were clearly prized by their owners, because some have been found mummified. Examination of these mummies has revealed that some suffered from rickets, which is caused by vitamin deficiency. This was no doubt because of the unnatural diets on which they were fed. Others had tuberculosis, the result of being kept in close proximity to humans, and therefore in contact with human diseases.

It is sad when wild animals, particularly highly intelligent primates, are kept as playthings or symbols of wealth. I give thanks for animal rescue centres and for the dedicated people who nurse ill-treated “pets” back to health and, whenever possible, rehabilitate them so they can be released into the wild places where they belong.

A prayer:

Hear our humble prayer, O God,
for our friends the animals,
especially for animals who are suffering;
for any that are hunted or lost or deserted or frightened or hungry;
for all that will be put to death.

We entreat for them all Thy mercy and pity,
and for those who deal with them we ask a heart of compassion,
and gentle hands and kindly words.

Make us ourselves, to be true friends to animals,
and so to share the blessings of the merciful. AMEN

(Albert Schweitzer, 1875-1965)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Langur monkeys, India (photo: Pete Wildman)