

'HUMANS ARE ANIMALS': A CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the numerous animal metaphors in the Book of Proverbs. It accomplishes this using the analytical tools provided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). More precisely, the article talks a lot about the metaphor that can be briefly stated as "HUMANS ARE ANIMALS." Through close and careful analysis of some of the proverbs in this biblical book, the research illustrates how the behaviours and characteristics of animals are strategically employed to symbolize and represent a variety of human behaviours, along with a multitude of virtues and vices. By doing this, the approach not only throws individual traits into sharp relief but also highlights the broader cultural and moral attitudes of the ancient Israelite culture from which these proverbs are taken. The study emphasizes and underscores the rationale for using such metaphors, demonstrating how effectively they convey the essence of human character by drawing on concrete images from the animal kingdom. This approach gives insight into the intricate interaction and interplay of language, cognitive processes, and cultural forces as established and developed in biblical literature. It is recommended that future research extend this inquiry to examine how the animal metaphors of Proverbs can inform contemporary theological discourse and contribute to cross-cultural hermeneutical engagement, particularly in traditions where proverbial and animal imagery continue to shape moral and spiritual formation.

KEYWORDS: Metaphor, animals, proverbs, conceptualization, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

The book of Proverbs is lush and expansive, reaching out to the vast and varied natural world around us. Among its many lasting metaphors, some of the most vivid and memorable are those comparing human conduct to the behaviour of other animals. From the industry and diligence illustrated by the ant to the terrifying havoc of an enraged lion, these comparisons are never drawn simply to represent; they are rich in concept. The Book of Proverbs frequently employs striking and concrete imagery, especially in the form of diverse animal metaphors. Such metaphors are concrete expressions of

moral and religious aphorisms, rooted in the daily realities of agrarian and pastoral life familiar to ancient Israelite civilization. In this context, animals are not merely symbols, but didactic devices aimed at illustrating and underscoring the benefits of wise living over foolish living. Such metaphors play a significant role in shaping and determining how readers conceptualize and interpret major themes such as moral character, social conduct, and the dictates of divine wisdom. In Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) terms, such statements demonstrate how abstract human attributes are conventionally understood through the observation of animal behaviour, which provides recourse to tangible, corporeal experiences.

This essay investigates the metaphor 'HUMANS ARE ANIMALS' in Proverbs from the CMT perspective, investigating how animal imagery is used as a poetic device and cognitive mapping within wisdom instruction. For Proverbs, animal metaphors are not ornamental but are utilitarian. They are paths of applied wisdom that link the natural world to moral and spiritual dimensions. They are an incarnational wisdom truth rooted in the creation act, revealed to all human beings, and inviting contemplation. These works invite readers to pay attention to animals and heed their instincts as an example of flourishing in God's creation.

Through a systematic examination of an innovatively selected group of proverbs that metaphorically compare human actions with a range of animals, the research clearly shows how the biblical text operates as a moral stimulus through accessible and, at times, vivid metaphors. Furthermore, it makes a strong case that these metaphors should not be relegated to a secondary level or kept as incidental but are instead an integral part of how the book of Proverbs addresses wisdom, thereby basing moral instruction in tangible and visible realities in the newly created world. For this reason, I will begin by discussing the portrayal of animals in the Old Testament.

ANIMALS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the account of creation in Genesis 1, God created on the fifth day a particular group of creatures: *הַיָּצִיּוֹת* ("living creatures") to live in both aquatic and non-aquatic environments (Gen. 1:20). These creatures were pleasing to the divine and were blessed to multiply and fill their respective worlds (Gen. 1:21–22). On the sixth day, the divine decree commanded the earth to produce a greater diversity of living creatures, including domesticated animals, creeping things, and wild beasts (Gen. 1:24–25).

The biblical narrative highlights the divine provision of plants, seed-bearing plants, and fruit-bearing trees, all fashioned to sustain humankind. All the living creatures endowed with the breath of life were placed under human control and management (Gen. 1:29–30). God is described in Genesis 2:7 as having breathed into Adam's nostrils so that he became a living creature (*הַיָּצִיּוֹת*), the same word used for

animals previously in the book. Similarly, Genesis 2:19 refers to the animals being presented to Adam to be named as living creatures (חַיָּוִת נָפְשׁוֹת), emphasizing the everyday life that human beings and animals share within the creation narrative.

In Genesis 6, God surveys creation and observes that the earth has become violent and that "all flesh" has corrupted its ways (Gen. 6:11-12). After the flood, God makes a covenant with humanity and with "every living creature of all flesh" (Gen. 9:15), reinforcing the theological notion that all living beings, both human and non-human, possess the breath of life and are considered flesh. This shared biological and spiritual composition is further underscored in the biblical prohibition against consuming blood, which is identified as the life force of a creature (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:14). Thus, blood functions as a vital symbol of life, common to both humans and animals.

The biblical portrayal of animals as fleshly creatures endowed with the breath of life offers a fundamental understanding of life that unites humans and non-human animals. Scripture does not distinguish between humans and animals, as seen in Ecclesiastes 3:19, where it is stated that the fate of humans and animals is the same; they share the elemental characteristics of life, breath, and blood. This theological anthropology presents a compelling vision of interrelatedness between all forms of life based on their common participation in the divine creative breath of God (Clough, 2022).

In several places in Scripture, animals are depicted as possessing wisdom or spiritual insight greater than that of human beings. One of the most striking examples is the story of Balaam and his ass (Num. 22:21–34), which contrasts the ass's sensitivity to divine presence with Balaam's spiritual blindness—again, Proverbs 30:24–28 ascribes wisdom to several small animals and uses them as moral examples. The passage instructs the reader, particularly the lazy or foolish, to observe the ant, which is praised for working diligently to save grain in the summer with a view to the winter. Along with the ant, the badger (or rock hyrax) is commended for its strategic concealment in rocky crevices, the locust for its orderly march in a line without a leader being present, and the lizard, which can be easily trapped with the hand but resides in the palaces of kings. They are referred to as "exceedingly wise," reflecting the biblical tradition in which non-human animals are part of God's creation but also serve as bearers of divine wisdom (Clough, 2022).

In brief, the Old Testament portrays animals as more than bit players in the drama of human history but as serious actors in the theological and ethical landscape of the Scripture. They are described as being חַיָּוִת נָפְשׁוֹת—living souls that possess the breath of life and share essential aspects in common with human beings, such as flesh, blood, and the potential for interaction with God. The story of Balaam's ass, along with the wisdom of other animals such as ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards, demonstrates that certain

animals in the Hebrew Bible are occasionally invested with a degree of insight, awareness, and moral accountability that human beings often overlook or underestimate. These representations evoke a theological anthropology in which animals are not just components of God's creation but also carriers of divine wisdom and moral guidance.

This rich theological and metaphorical use of animal imagery extends throughout the Old Testament. Animals frequently serve as symbolic representations of human traits, divine attributes, or cosmic forces. The lion symbolizes strength and royalty (cf. Gen. 49:9; Prov. 28:1), the serpent deceit and danger (cf. Gen. 3:1; Num. 21:6), the dove peace and innocence (cf. Gen. 8:8-12), and the eagle divine protection and power (cf. Exod. 19:4; Isa. 40:31). These metaphors draw on the perceptible characteristics of animals to express complex theological understandings, moral instructions, and emotional states. Such metaphorical richness exemplifies the extensive framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, wherein concrete realms, such as animals, are used to explain abstract concepts like fortitude, cleverness, innocence, or judgment.

Imagery and animal metaphors occupy a central and prominent position in the Old Testament, providing a vivid and living context for conveying elemental spiritual truths, human nature elements, and the qualities of God. Firmly rooted in the agrarian and pastoral culture that characterized ancient Israel, these metaphors express the close and intimate relationship between humans and the animal kingdom with which they were closely identified. In the Bible, various animals are used as powerful symbols, including the majestic lion, the soaring eagle, the gentle sheep, the treacherous serpent, and the powerful ox. Animals fulfill a diverse range of roles in conveying significant messages. For example, the eagle in Exodus 19:4 symbolizes divine power and vigilant care, while the sheep in Isaiah 53:6 and the industrious ant in Proverbs 6:6-8 symbolize human weakness and instability. These metaphors drawn from these animals are theologically profound and are quite intentionally used to teach, warn, comfort, or condemn individuals or groups.

Beyond their role as mere literary devices, animal imagery serves a theological purpose in reflecting the spiritual and moral condition of Israel's relationship with God. Prophets liken oppressive rulers to predatory animals, while psalmists find refuge, terror, and praise metaphors in the animal kingdom. In some books, animals even represent nations or universal powers (e.g., the beasts in Daniel 7), and in others, they symbolize peace and reconciliation, as seen in Isaiah 11's dream of a wolf and a lamb lying together. Such use of imagery allows the Old Testament to speak to us in specific, culture-literate language that touches the heart and imagination, making great verities intelligible through the world around us.

Therefore, Old Testament animals are both literal and metaphorical. They are fellow creatures with common vitality, agents in the theological drama, and metaphors that enhance the theological and poetic contours of the biblical text. Recognizing the

importance of animal imagery enables a more holistic and integrated reading of Scripture, valuing the interconnected relationship among humans, animals, and the divine within the order of creation.

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY: A BRIEF STUDY

In their influential work, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson pioneered what is now known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), also referred to as Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Turner, 1996; Turner and Foucancier, 2000, 2003; Gibbs, 1999). They argue that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament or a poetic device but a fundamental mechanism that shapes our everyday thinking, actions, and language through the process of metaphorical mapping. Metaphors, according to CMT, structure the way we conceptualize our experiences and organize our thoughts, not only in how we speak but also in how we perceive and interact with the world (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Metaphors, being conceptual in nature, significantly influence cognitive structures and are highly embedded in our experience schemata. Metaphors operate beyond the intellectual plane and originate from lived experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980); in this way, metaphors can influence our perception of the world and shape our behaviour to a certain degree. The lack of conscious awareness of our conceptual scheme implies that subsequent actions are very automatic (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003). This implies that metaphors, once employed repeatedly and reinforced, can radically change how we view the world. Consequently, they influence our actions without our knowledge, making metaphors a crucial tool in the construction and maintenance of ideology and propaganda (Wasniewski, 4). Metaphors are also an essential part of the native speaker's cognitive lexicon. They tend to develop from more literal or basic senses of things, reflecting high degrees of polysemy and idiomaticity in cognitive and linguistic representations.

A conceptual metaphor encapsulates understanding a single domain of experience, an abstract one for that matter, in terms of some other, generally more concrete one. It is for this reason that Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is accordingly characterized as "understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another" (Kovecses, 2022; Forceville, 2009; Umaru, 2025; Umaru, "The Shepherd Motif in John: A Conceptual Metaphor Approach," 2025). Gerard J. Steen (2007) further illuminates the fact that conceptual metaphors "constitute conceptual analogies between elements, relations, and properties within a single domain and their projected versions in some other domain". Alice Deignan also subscribes to this position by describing how "a domain is an area of meaning, e.g., the concepts associated with CLEANLINESS AND DIRT" (in scholarly writing on conceptual metaphors, names of

domains are typically set in capital letters). Domains, Deignan (2010) says, comprise entities, attributes, processes, and relations that are internally organized and accessed mentally as an integrated whole.

A conceptual metaphor consists of two domains: the source domain, from which we draw language and imagery, and the target domain, which is understood through the lens of the source. A conceptual domain is "any coherent organization of experience," representing how individuals structure and interpret the world around them (Kovecses, 2022; Umaru, 2025). People draw upon familiar experiences in the source domain to understand more abstract or less tangible experiences in the target domain. In other words, the theory assumes that human knowledge of the world stems essentially from physical interaction with the surroundings, which subsequently allows us to map these knowledge structures onto abstract domains. For example, in the metaphor "God is my refuge," *refuge* belongs to the source domain, connoting safety, protection, and shelter, while *God* is the target domain being conceptualized in those terms.

George Lakoff (1993) emphasizes that "poetic, metaphorical expressions are not in language, but in thought: they are general mappings across conceptual domains." This assertion reinforces the idea that metaphors are not merely linguistic embellishments but cognitive tools that shape the very structure of human understanding. Therefore, the metaphorical expressions are grounded in the world around us: animals, plants, complex objects, and natural physical things, which leads to the Great Chain of Being metaphors.

THE GREAT METAPHOR CHAIN

To effectively carry out this study, it is essential to highlight the Great Chain Metaphor, which enables us to comprehend non-human attributes by conceptualizing them in terms of human characteristics. Under the broader framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) refer to this as the Great Chain of Being Metaphor, through which ontological metaphors are understood as structured along a hierarchical model. In this model, various categories of entities are arranged according to their complexity and perceived vitality. The hierarchy is typically organized as follows:

Human beings → Animals → Plants → Complex Objects → Natural Physical Things

This metaphorical chain enables the projection of human qualities onto non-human entities by mapping traits from higher to lower levels of the hierarchy. For instance, attributing human emotions to animals or ascribing agency to natural phenomena reflects the underlying logic of this conceptual structure. The Great Chain

Metaphor thus serves as a vital interpretive tool for analysing metaphors found in literature, religious texts, and everyday language.

Building upon this foundation, the Great Chain of Being metaphor determines the relationships among its various hierarchical orders. Meaning is constructed through the metaphorical transfer of properties from one category of being to another. Or each level is characterized by having the properties that define the lower ones, but also incorporates an additional distinctive trait. This process reflects how humans relate to and conceptualize entities considered lower in the hierarchy. The structure posits that humans occupy the highest position, followed by animals, plants, and finally, inanimate objects (Gil & Ruiz, 2005).

Within this framework, metaphors enable us to understand one category in terms of another. For instance, we often conceptualize humans as animals, drawing on shared attributes such as instincts, emotions, or behaviours. This can be represented through the metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. Likewise, inanimate objects can be metaphorically elevated through human traits, demonstrating the reverse projection of human characteristics onto lower-order entities. The hierarchical structure thus informs a wide range of metaphorical expressions that are deeply embedded in both language and cognition (Saralamba, 2021; Gil & Ruiz, 2005).

Therefore, Old Testament animals are both literal and metaphorical. They are fellow creatures with common vitality, agents in the theological drama, and metaphors that enhance the theological and poetic contours of the biblical text. Recognizing the importance of animal imagery enables a more holistic and integrated reading of Scripture, one that values the interconnected relationship among humans, animals, and the divine within the order of creation.

A CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR 'PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS'

The use of animal imagery throughout the Old Testament is a valuable literary and theological tool, conveying multifaceted concepts through relatable elements of everyday life in ancient Israel. Often, animals are seen as symbolizing human traits or divine qualities. The lion, being a strong and fearsome creature, symbolizes God's strength (Hosea 11:10) or symbolizes the danger presented by foes (Proverbs 28:15). On the other hand, sheep are at the centre of Israel's pastoral imagery, symbolizing God's flock in need of guidance and care, either the divine presence or a royal power being the shepherd (Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34). In prophetic writing and narrative, eagles, snakes, bears, and donkeys are employed to represent motifs of judgment, wisdom, foolishness, or divine intervention. In Wisdom Literature, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, animals serve as a means to teach moral lessons and offer insights into the natural world.

Proverbs often use the example of different animals, like the ant, lion, or lizard, to represent qualities like diligence, strength, or flexibility (Proverbs 6:6-8; 30:24-28). Some of the most vivid and metaphorical descriptions of animals in biblical literature can be found in the Book of Job, particularly in the descriptions of the behemoth and Leviathan, which are used to express the greatness of God's creative power and the limits of human knowledge (Job 40–41). These tales aim to convey the author's perceptive observations of nature while affirming the predominant motifs of divine wisdom, righteousness, and the enigma of creation. In describing these images, the Wisdom Books emphasize the mysteriousness and attractiveness of life and urge individuals to exhibit prudence and modesty in their approach to the divine.

Individuals draw on their understanding of the natural world to create a compelling social reality and utilize metaphors to examine their interaction with nature. Since animals exist in our world, it is intriguing that humans are frequently explained and understood in terms of animals. Animals as a species occupy a lower position in the Great Chain of Metaphors; each level of the hierarchy is defined by the characteristics that bind the lower levels, even as they also include a unique characteristic. Therefore, they serve as the appropriate vehicle for explaining the appearances and temperaments of good and evil. In fact, it is also possible to view human characteristics in terms of homologous animal characteristics (Saralamba, 2021). Thus, since animals are tangible objects familiar to every human being, they can serve as an effective source domain to understand abstract concepts like human character and social status. In mapping the correspondences between the source and target, we typically examine the source domain entities and their attributes, as well as their relations to the environment, their actions, and the actions taken on or with them (Wasniewska, 2018).

The representation of humans as animals is a fascinating issue from both cognitive and cultural perspectives. In addition, the community's cultural views and attitudes towards specific associations and the construction of animals also play a crucial role in the formation and construction of animal metaphors. Consequently, it is interesting to explore the representation of humans through the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. For the purpose of this paper, it is noteworthy to observe that when people use animal-based metaphors to compare and understand humans in terms of animal characteristics, they inevitably assume that both share specific traits related to animal appearance and behaviour. Generally, animal imagery comparisons and understandings have essential cultural implications (Saralamba, 2021).

Small animals

Small animals, ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards conceptualize wisdom, strategy, and survival despite weakness:

"Go to the ant (חַמְלָה), you sluggard, consider its ways" (Prov. 6:6)

Proverbs 6:6 commands, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise," employing the metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. We understand people's behaviour in relation to the characteristics of animals. The ant symbolizes industry and diligence, and the sluggard symbolizes indolence. The behaviour of the ant working alone and sustaining itself is a synonym for righteous action and wise living. This parable teaches that indolence is against nature and dignity, but industry is an act of obedience to a divine decree.

The metaphor organizes moral knowledge in the sense of grounding ethics in reality and suggesting that wisdom is sensory and body-based. Proverbs 6:6 teaches us through the observation of another animal, illustrating a Hebraic epistemology where knowledge is experiential, relational, and visual. In the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor, the ant represents the moral self, and the sluggard must change to be in line with it. The metaphor identifies moral instruction with behaviour.

"Like a bird (רָפוּר) that wanders from its nest, so a man who wanders away from his place" (Prov. 27:8).

The metaphor maps one onto a bird. A bird exiting the nest is indicative of vulnerability, disorientation, and risk. "The nest" represents stability, identity, belonging, and security. The metaphor suggests that leaving one's home or place brings on loss of direction, vulnerability to harm, or moral deterioration. As a nest, home is perceived as necessary for thriving; straying away upsets the sheltering order of wisdom.

The metaphor also has a social and moral dimension. In ancient Near East (ANE) culture, "home" represented a private and enclosed space closely tied to land, family, and tribe. Thus, going out of it suggests disruption in spiritual and social order. The bird metaphor emphasizes disruption through a common observation: birds out of their nests are restless and vulnerable. The imagery invites reflection on the value of stability and roots, presenting restlessness as unnatural.

"The leech (עֲלִיקָה) has two daughters, give! Give!! They cry" (Prov. 30:15).

This verse uses a leech as a metaphor for human greed. The leech symbolizes insatiable desire, and the subject is human greed. The proverb illustrates dehumanization through unchecked appetite by describing the leech's "daughters" crying, "Give! Give!". These metaphorical "daughters" are not actual children but extensions of parasitism, voracious and clamouring.

This metaphor presents human greed as animalistic, parasitic, and destructive. The verse equates insatiability with a leech, draining life instead of providing it. This metaphor condemns a deformed relationship with resources, presenting greed as an unhinged impulse. This metaphor suggests that living like a leech undermines moral and environmental harmony. The metaphor warns against becoming a leech: taking everything and giving nothing.

"The rock badgers (רֶפְשִׁים) are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the cliffs" (Prov. 30:26).

This imagery highlights wisdom in flexibility. Rock badgers are weak physically but wise in selecting secure dwelling places. What they do demonstrates true strength in knowing when and where to seek shelter and how to manage limitations wisely. This is reinforced by the biblical focus that true wisdom is most often found in hidden places and manifested in humble deeds.

"Locust (אַרְבֵּב) have no king, yet they advance in ranks" (Prov. 30:27).

This imagery is employed to symbolize human cooperation and the power of collaboration. Being like locusts, individuals can achieve great things together, even without leaders. The moral is that collective mind and coordination lead to effective action, manifesting a divine order valuing cooperation. Cooperative leadership is portrayed without needing a king, characterized by an organized and wise movement trait.

"A lizard (שָׂמָוִי) can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces" (Prov. 30:28).

This imagery is consistent with the biblical idea that wisdom and goodness often arise from the humble, not the powerful. The lizard's success in entering the king's palace proves that "quiet perseverance wins many a victory," proving that effort and humility lead to accomplishment. Even the weak in wisdom may become great through tenacity.

Big or Dangerous Animals

Dangerous or big animals (dog, lion, bear, ox, bird, leech, rooster, and snake) model beauty, grace, strength, folly, danger, pride, or foolish behaviour.

"A loving doe (יְעֹלָה), a graceful deer (אַיִל), let her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you ever be intoxicated with her love" (Prov. 5:19).

This verse uses the Metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS to compare a loving wife to a gentle doe. It maps the beauty and grace of the wild animals onto a woman in the domains of marriage, love, and intimacy. This metaphorical expression emphasizes tenderness, beauty, and sensitivity, portraying the wife as alluring and her love exceedingly gratifying.

This metaphor promotes marriage fidelity and joy. The imagery of the animal links love to nature's beauty and stresses exclusivity; a wild doe, like a wife's love, needs to be nurtured and protected. The metaphor is both sensually and morally compelling: it praises love in marriage while contrasting it with the destructive aspects of fornication. The animal metaphor suggests that this love, as natural as it is, is wise when confined within the bounds of a covenant.

"Free yourself, like a gazelle (צִבְּרִי) from the hand of the hunter, like a bird (צִפּוֹר) from the snare of the fowler" (Prov. 6:5).

The verse employs the Metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, connecting the necessity of deliverance to the instinctual flight of prey animals. The gazelle and bird embody speed, agility, and danger awareness, qualities attributed to a compromised human. Humans ought to run away from predators as vigorously as these animals do. The predator represents possible legal, economic, or social repercussions.

This metaphor illustrates and evokes a visceral response. It suggests that hesitation can lead to ruin, like a slow gazelle or distracted bird. In Hebrew wisdom, wisdom is embodied and lived through action and responsiveness to danger. The verse portrays the behaviour of animals to suggest that genuine wisdom can resemble a panic-fuelled flight from preventable entrapment, rather than a sense of duty. It emphasizes that prompt, decisive action is an ethical and sensible reaction in some circumstances.

"Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened calf (שֹׁרֵץ) with hatred" (Prov. 15:17).

Implicit metaphors of food reflect animal imagery. Celebration and wealth are expressed by the "fattened ox" but are paired with hatred and thereby made meaningless. On the other hand, a "dinner of herbs" becomes meaningful if seasoned with love.

The proverb juxtaposes primitive needs -food, people, harmony-implicating people as animals. The PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor highlights that humans share the exact primitive needs with animals, but differ in their capacity for love, peacefulness, and moral judgment. The verse suggests that flourishing results from nurturing life-giving relationships rather than focusing solely on bodily hunger. It condemns a purely material or animalistic view of wellness and advocates for a holistic, wisdom-guided life.

"Where there are no oxen (אֲלֵךְ), the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox (אֲלֵךְ) come abundant harvest" (Prov. 14:4).

This verse employs the ox as a metaphor for human labour and its intricacies. The ox embodies the required toil and sacrifices of good work. The clean manger symbolizes order and idleness, whereas the dirty ox symbolizes strength and plenty. PRODUCTIVE PEOPLE ARE OXEN: sturdy, hardworking, and essential to success.

This metaphor is a criticism of perfectionism and the avoidance of hardship. It acknowledges that worthwhile outcomes often entail costs, mess, fatigue, and risk. The metaphor puts human productivity alongside animal labour, implying that wisdom embraces mess and effort as the natural pulse of life. It is argued that human thriving, like agriculture, relies on earthy grit instead of sterilized idealism.

"The wicked flee though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion (לֵאָוִן)" (Prov. 28:1).

This verse uses the Metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS to liken two types of people who have animal-like characteristics. The second line directly likens the righteous to a lion, symbolizing strength and power, suggesting that righteousness yields confidence and stability. The lion symbolizes courage in both biblical and cultural contexts, representing moral strength rather than physical strength.

Although not directly likened to an animal, the wicked exhibit prey-like tendencies, such as running away without pursuit. This signifies paranoia and instability, characteristics of preyed-upon animals. It implies that wickedness results in a disordered interior life, similar to an animal responding to perceived danger. The contrast between the predator's boldness and the prey's fear reveals a profound truth: righteousness brings peace inwardly, while guilt undermines it. The verse demonstrates moral understanding through animal behaviour, emphasizing that boldness results from integrity rather than aggression.

"The lion (לִפְיָר), which is mightiest among beasts and does not turn back before any, the strutting greyhound (מִתְנַחֵם), the he-goat (זֵבִי), and a king whose army is with him" (Prov. 30:30, 31).

Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the schema PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS projects animalistic characteristics onto human attributes, particularly leadership. The lion embodies courage and dominance, and the rooster has self-confidence and assertiveness. The he-goat symbolizes leadership, persistence, and stubbornness. Each animal symbolises the qualities humans are to assume in positions of power.

The last picture of a king and his troops ties the metaphor together. It compares great animals; the king embodies authority, whereas they exhibit natural power. This mapping suggests that leadership is like the animals' confidence. The proverb is a mini bestiary, employing animal behaviour to demonstrate human virtue. It emphasizes that leadership is a matter of presence, stability, and respect, qualities that exist in nature.

"Better to meet a bear (דִּב) robbed of her cubs than a fool bent on folly" (Prov 17:12).

The metaphor creates a strong picture of a bear separated from her cubs, illustrating the devastating consequences of a foolish individual's actions. The bear represents raw anger and hazard. A mother bear separated from her cubs symbolizes horrifying anger in most societies. The proverb suggests that this deadly encounter is better than facing a fool in irrationality.

Folly is considered to be worse than instinctual violence. The rage of a bear, awful as it is, is predictable and natural. A fool acts irrationally and uncontrollably, so his folly is uncontrollable and contagious. This trope highlights folly as a moral and social threat, as a wild force. The verse suggests that engaging with a fool is not merely frustrating but also perilous, more so than encountering a ferocious beast.

"A horse (סוּס) is made ready for the battle, but victory rests with the Lord" (Prov. 21:31).

This verse employs the Metaphor of PEOPLE as ANIMALS, and the horse here represents strength and preparedness for battle. The horse embodies controlled power and planned action, mapping onto human roles in conflict planning and preparation. The proverb suggests that, like a war-trained horse, human beings will be held accountable for their effort and readiness.

The second line changes the focus: "the victory is the Lord's," emphasizing that, although human effort is required, it is not ultimate. The CMT structure presents a LIMITATION OF THE ANIMAL METAPHOR: animals (and human beings) can be trained, but outcomes are not in their power. The proverb opposes reliance on visible strength versus a narrowly naturalistic worldview. The horse figure refers to the usefulness of wisdom and readiness in a broader concept: GOD IS THE DETERMINER OF OUTCOMES. It is a reminder that all things are in God's control.

"As a dog (כֶּלֶב) returns to his vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Prov. 26:11).

This verse employs the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor to liken a fool to a dog, which was considered unclean in ancient Israelite culture. The dog returning to its vomit symbolizes how folly is repeated by a fool, highlighting the illogical and degrading nature of such actions.

The metaphor powerfully critiques not just foolish behaviour but the persistence of that behaviour despite its clear consequences. By likening a fool to a dog returning to what should naturally repel him, the proverb casts folly as a moral and cognitive sickness that should be rejected, but which the fool perversely embraces. This comparison strips the fool of human rationality and dignity, framing repeated folly as instinct-driven, base behaviour. The proverb cautions against folly through the behaviour of animals, illustrating its foolishness and evoking disgust and a moral imperative in the hearer.

"As a roaring lion (לֵאָה), and a ranging bear (דָּב); so is a wicked ruler over poor people" (Prov. 28:15).

Using CMT and the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor, this verse is likening the behaviour of predatory animals to an evil ruler. The roaring lion and the charging bear represent assertiveness and aggression, depicting an unjust political leader as brutal and instinct-driven rather than just.

The metaphor dehumanizes because it compares a ruler to beasts, and tyranny is defined as unjust and backward. It refers to poor individuals as vulnerable prey, highlighting the scandal of exploiting power instead of protecting it. In pre-monarchic Israel, kings were to be God's agents of justice and leadership to the people; the inference of this proverb is that the absence of moral leadership has its effects. The

animal metaphor here indicates that leaders who forsake wisdom are as dangerous as beasts.

CONCLUSION

In the Book of Proverbs, animal metaphors serve functions beyond mere decoration; they are at the heart of the book's didactic aims. These metaphors are drawn from the natural world, wherein common animals exhibit wisdom and principles of behaviour. In a society highly aware of farm rhythms, stock husbandry, and natural cycles, such metaphors made wisdom both accessible and applicable. Regardless of whether they consider the ant's work ethic or the lion's courage, all the animals serve as narrative tropes that convey moral insight in a manner that ordinary people can understand, remember, and apply. The natural world is presented to us as a living encyclopaedia, wherein God's wisdom is revealed by Scripture and inscribed into the very order of creation itself.

The wisdom learned from observing animals in Proverbs exemplifies an incarnational or immanent theological approach to knowledge. In this view, wisdom is not an abstract or elitist pursuit, but something discovered within the ordinary and accessible rhythms of creation. Proverbs present the natural world as a mirror of human character, where virtues such as diligence, prudence, and courage are reflected even in the smallest creatures. The text calls readers to a contemplative life, one that learns through observation, reflection, and harmony with the moral order established by the divine. This vision of knowledge as available to all, regardless of social or educational status, finds resonance in many African cultures, where animals in proverbs and folktales embody moral and communal values. Such parallels reveal a shared cultural rhythm in transmitting wisdom through narrative and metaphor. For this reason, Proverbs holds significant relevance for African biblical hermeneutics, engaging traditional forms of moral education and formation. When read within its cultural and theological context, Proverbs emerges not as a relic of ancient thought but as a living source of wisdom that continues to speak with clarity and depth to contemporary life.

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