

1. Introduction

In Genesis 16:12 Hagar receives a prophetic message about her son Ishmael: he will be a wild donkey of a man.

Many Bible scholars consider this to be a description of the Arabs in the Middle East being wild men who plunder and murder.¹ Already in the 11th Century, the Jewish rabbi Raschi wrote that Ishmael would be a robber.² When we follow the news in the West, we may easily have the same opinion and come to the conclusion that this is what God foretold Hagar some 4000 years ago.

However, what did God actually say? How did Hagar understand these words with her knowledge of the animal world? And how is the wild donkey described in other places in Scripture? Here we will discover God's real message to Hagar.

2. The wild donkey as animal

The original habitat of the wild donkey is northern Africa and the Arabian peninsula. Even today, travellers in the desert of Oman or the United Arab Emirates are likely to come across herds of wild donkeys. So, Hagar must have been familiar with the wild donkey.

The Animal Diversity Web gives the following information about the donkey:³

"Behaviour: Donkeys are social animals. In the wild they travel in herds of several individuals to up to one hundred individuals. Donkeys are observant and cautious animals. They will refuse to do anything that seems dangerous to them. This behavior has earned the donkey its reputation for being stubborn, but actually, domestic donkeys are very obedient animals and will not refuse any reasonable order. When a donkey is startled by something, it usually will not run blindly in fear. Its natural instinct is to freeze or run a few steps, then look to see what frightened it. Domestic donkeys interact well with other livestock animals such as horses, cows, goats, sheep, and llamas. Donkeys are passive by nature, but will aggressively protect their young, and can be trained to protect sheep and goats as well. Donkeys will not hesitate to attack and trample large dogs or even humans if they perceive the animal to be a threat. Donkeys are used as companions for weaned foals and for nervous, injured, or recovering animals. They have a calming, soothing effect on the animals and help to reduce the stress of traumatic situations. Donkeys are also being used as companion animals in recreational riding programs for children and for mentally and physically handicapped people, because of their affectionate, calm, patient disposition.

Food Habits: Donkeys are grazing herbivores, with large, flat-surfaced teeth adapted for tearing and chewing plant matter. Their primary food is grass, but they also eat other shrubs and desert plants.

Economic Importance for Humans: Donkeys played a very important role in developing long-distance trade in ancient Egypt, because of their weight-bearing capacity and their adaptation

The Wild Donkey

for desert travel. Female donkeys were kept as dairy animals. Donkey milk is higher in sugar and protein than cow's milk. Throughout history donkeys have been invaluable as beasts of burden. Even today, donkeys are of great economic importance especially in remote areas. They are being used extensively in efforts to boost the economy and alleviate poverty in poorer areas of the world."

This picture is much more positive than we are used to in the West. One only needs to think about sayings, like "He is as stubborn as a donkey." Even then, we assign value to the donkey as well, when we say "better a donkey that carries me than a horse that throws me."

FactZoo.com confirms the positive image of the donkey: "The donkey or ass is arguably the noblest beast in all of the animal kingdom. The ass is sober, patient, cautious, intelligent, sure-footed, has good stamina and contrary to common belief is not stubborn. The dog may be man's best friend but the ass is no stranger."⁴

In the past, the donkey was seen as a valuable animal. Dr. Smith quoted people in 1901, saying, 'In the East it is especially remarkable for its patience, gentleness, intelligence, meek submission and great power of endurance.'--L. Abbott. The color is usually a reddish brown, but there are white asses, which are much prized. The ass was the animal of peace as the horse was the animal of war; hence the appropriateness of Christ in his triumphal entry riding on an ass. The wild ass is a beautiful animal. ED. Mr. Lavard remarks that in fleetness the wild ass (*Asinus hemippus*) equals the gazelle and to overtake it is a feat which only one or two of the most celebrated mares have been known to accomplish."⁵

No wonder that in ancient times the donkey was used by kings and other nobles to ride on, as did for instance king David and his son Solomon.⁶

So, Hagar must have perceived the message about the wild donkey as being positive. Still, one wonders what God was saying. Therefore we now turn to the Bible.

Wild donkeys in Oman



3. The wild donkey in the Bible

In the Hebrew Old Testament, five words are employed for the donkey or ass. The most common word is *chāmôr* (Strong's H2543), followed by *'âthôn* (Strong's H860) and *'ēyir* (Strong's H5895). All these refer to the domesticated donkey. The words *'ârâd* (Strong's H6167), *'ârôd* (Strong's H6171) and *pereh* (Strong's H6501) depict the wild donkey. Because the first two words appear only once, they are not taken into consideration in this study. *Pereh* appears a total of 10 times in the Bible and is used in Genesis 16:12 to describe Ishmael. The following table helps us gain a better understanding of *pereh*.

Reference	Verse text ⁷	Spoken by	Usage	Meaning
Genesis 16:12	And he will be a wild man; his hand <i>will be</i> against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.	Angel of God	figuratively	Positive ?
Job 6:5	Doth the wild ass bray when he hath grass? or loweth the ox over his fodder?	Job	figuratively	Neutral
Job 11:12	For vain man would be wise, though man be born <i>like</i> a wild ass's colt	Zophar	figuratively	neutral
Job 24:5	Behold, <i>the</i> wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work; rising betimes for a prey: the wilderness <i>yieldeth</i> food for them <i>and</i> for <i>their</i> children	Job	figuratively	positive
Job 39:5	Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass? ⁸	God	literally	Positive
Psalms 104:11	They give drink to every beast of the field: the wild asses quench their thirst.	Psalmist (David?)	literally	neutral
Isaiah 32:14	Because the palaces shall be forsaken; the multitude of the city shall be left; ... a joy of wild asses, a pasture of flocks	God (through prophet)	literally	Neutral
Jeremiah 2:24	A wild ass used to the wilderness, <i>thāt</i> snuffeth up the wind at her pleasure; in her occasion who can turn her away?	God (through prophet)	figuratively	negative
Jeremiah 14:6	And the wild asses did stand in the high places, they snuffed up the wind like dragons; their eyes did fail, because <i>there was</i> no grass.	God (through prophet)	literally	neutral
Hosea 8:9	For they are gone up to Assyria, a wild ass alone by himself: Ephraim hath hired lovers	God (through prophet)	figuratively	positive

The right column shows the meaning of the reference to the donkey in a particular verse. When it speaks about literal donkeys the picture is neutral or positive. For example, Psalm 104 speaks about God's care for the animals of the field by providing water for them. The wild donkey is mentioned specifically, without saying anything negative about the behavior of the animal.

Where the donkey is compared with humans, all possibilities appear, ranging from negative to positive.

It seems the most negative comparison is found in Job 24:5, where they serve to illustrate the people who get up early "for a prey." This is based on the Hebrew word *tereph* (Strong's

H2964), which has the meaning of: prey, food and leaf. As the interpretation of prey is not possible for herbivorous animals, the proper translation is "rising betimes for food," just like the poor who suffer under the injustice of the unrighteous and have to work hard to get food. Some also see a negative picture of the wild donkey in Job 11:12. This seems to be based on their own negative image of the animal. Nothing is being said of the animal itself, either positively or negatively and the message would be equally true if a cow or sheep was used in the comparison. The fact that the wild donkey is referred to, indicates that the nomadic Job was familiar with it. This is confirmed by the fact that the wild donkey is mentioned more often in the book of Job than in any other Bible book.

The only remaining negative reference is Jeremiah 2:24, where unfaithful and adulterous Israel is compared to a wild female donkey, desperately looking for a male to mate with. Even here, it doesn't necessarily say anything negative about the donkeys themselves, because the she-camel is mentioned in the same way in verse 23, and in Jeremiah 5:8 horses are mentioned in a similar illustration.

Positive images of the wild donkey are found in Hosea, where it is said to behave better than the Israelites and in Job 24, where its zeal is praised and compared with the zeal of the poor to provide food for their families.

All in all, the Bible portrays the wild donkey as a neutral or positive animal. In some cases, the image is arguably negative, but then that applies to other animals as well, like the cow and camel. The domesticated donkey (*chamôr*) is sometimes used in a negative comparison too, for instance in Jeremiah 22:19, and even there the animal itself isn't portrayed negatively.

Just as the wild ass is a symbolic description of Ishmael, so other animals are used symbolically to describe people. Tass Sada points out that Jacob likened five of his sons to an animal. Judah was a lion cub (Genesis 49:9), Issachar a strong ass (Gen. 49:14), Dan a serpent (Genesis 49:17), Naphtali a hind (Genesis 49:21) and Benjamin a wolf (Genesis 49:27).⁹

Three of these animals are dangerous and the image of Benjamin is downright aggressive. Of him Jacob said, "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; In the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil."¹⁰



In light of these comparisons, the image of Ishmael as wild donkey is certainly not negative.

4. Symbolic meaning

The description of the wild donkey in Job 39:5-8 sheds much light on its symbolic meaning in Scripture. God said to Job, "Who has let the wild donkey go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift donkey, to whom I have given the arid plain for his home and the salt land for his dwelling place? He scorns the tumult of the city; he hears not the shouts of the driver. He ranges the mountains as his pasture, and he searches after every green thing."¹¹

Here the wild donkey is an image of freedom. He laughs at the drivers who spur on their donkeys that are carrying burdens and pulling carts, and he moves wherever he wants. The parallel with Ishmael is strengthened by the fact that the wild donkey lives in the desert, the habitat of Ishmael and his descendants.

5. Conclusion:

The donkey is a social animal, both to its own species and to other animals, and has a charming character. He is peaceful and lives by green crops, unlike predators that kill other animals. The donkey is willing and strong and a blessing to mankind in many ways, both past and present.

The image of the wild donkey in the Bible, whether literally or figuratively, is predominantly neutral or positive. This corresponds to the character and general behavior of the donkey.

The wild donkey is a symbol of freedom; this must have touched Hagar deeply. She was a runaway slave, seeking freedom from her harsh mistress. Her status as slave meant that her offspring was destined to be in slavery well. Once a slave, always a slave. God, however, promised Hagar that her son would not be a slave, but a free man!

Extra thought: most of the evenly colored donkeys have a black stripe on the back that runs from mane to tail and also a black stripe across the back from shoulder to shoulder. This has the shape of a cross. What symbolism could be hidden in this? Think about Jesus entering Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. What could this say about Ishmael in the end time? Could he be a special instrument in God's plan?



More information can be found at:

<http://beforeitsnews.com/politics/2010/12/sunday-hunt-for-links-donkey-edition-327082.html>
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/scripture-alphabet-of-animals/the-donkey.html>
<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/job-11.html> Section 'Though man be born'
under 'Verse 12' (Bible commentator Barnes about Job 11:12)

Acknowledgement of illustrations:

p2 personal collection

p4 donkey: https://shawnvanderlugt.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/donkey-532_1496020a.jpg

p4 lion: <http://animalwall.xyz/yawning-lion-teeth-sharp-predator-mouth-open-mane-desktop-backgrounds/>

p5 personal collection

¹ See for instance the Pulpit Commentary: 'Exemplified in the turbulent and lawless character of the Bedouin Arabs and Saracens for upwards of thirty centuries. "The Bedouins are the outlaws among the nations. Plunder is legitimate gain, and daring robbery is praised as valor (Kalisch)', Commentator Gill: "And he will be a wild man,.... Living in a wilderness, delighting in hunting and killing wild beasts, and robbing and plundering all that pass by; and such an one Ishmael was, see Genesis 21:20; and such the Saracens, his posterity, were, and such the wild Arabs are to this day, who descended from him." And Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary: 'he will be a wild man—literally, "a wild ass man," expressing how the wildness of Ishmael and his descendants resembles that of the wild ass.' Accessed at <http://biblehub.com/genesis/16-12.htm>

² http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8211#showrashi=true

³ http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/accounts/Equus_asinus/

⁴ <http://www.factzoo.com/mammals/donkeys.html>

⁵ Smith, William, Dr. "Entry for 'Ass'". "Smith's Bible Dictionary". . 1901. , accessed at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/ass.html>

⁶ 2 Samuel 16:2 and 1 Kings 1:38-40. See also Numbers 22:21 and Judges 5:10, 10:3-4, 12:14. For more background information, see the article <http://vanallsblog.blogspot.nl/2011/04/donkeys-for-kings-palm-sunday.html>

⁷ King James Version 1769

⁸ The Hebrew word translated wild ass is here 'ârôd (Strong's H6171); it appears nowhere else in the Bible

⁹ Saada, Tass. *Once in Arabic*, Copyright © by Taysir Abu Saada, 2008

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles

¹¹ Ibid