

The Role of Animals in the *Acta Thomae*

Abstract: The *Acta Thomae* is a 3rd-century text consisting of several episodes about the Apostle Thomas. In some chapters the main characters are animals. Some of these are given a human language, and their speech conveys a moral message, as in a fable. An analysis is offered of the contrast between the asses in *Act. Thom.* 4 & 8 and the tradition of donkeys in fable or comedy, as well as of notions of rational vs. irrational and the Ancient Greek intellectual debate over animal rationality. Act 3 features a speaking snake, an animal with evil connotations in Greek literature. The literary background of *Act. Thom.* is formed not only by the Hebrew sources of Christianity, but also by the Greek texts of fables or the pantomime, and it is important to analyse how the new Christian message is embodied in the old literary tradition.

1 Introduction

The role of speaking animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles has often been highlighted.¹ Here we consider the background to the appearance of animals in the Acts of the Apostle Thomas. *Acta Thomae* is a work, probably of the 3rd century, consisting of several episodes around a main character, the Apostle Thomas, commonly considered to be the evangelist of India.² Although the term ‘novel’ is much disputed where Christian writings are concerned, the work takes the form of a Christian story as a kind of novel, with many adventures, miracles, and subplots, some of them quite independent, with the character of Thomas as a common feature in them all. This kind of story recalls the Aesop Romance, an anonymous text close in time to the Apocryphal Acts and a tale that features quite different episodes around a main character, Aesop; fables play a great role in it and most of the adventures lead to some kind of moral conclusion. In a similar way, in the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas, a very humble apostle, sometimes disguised as a beggar, sometimes sold as a slave, always performs great deeds and

1 Matthews 1999 is one of the best papers on the topic.

2 To this day, the reference edition for *Act. Thom.* is still Lipsius-Bonnet 1898, 99–288, pending a new critical edition. An English translation with introduction is found in Pick 1908, 225–362. An important commentary on the text, with an English translation, is Klijn 2003. A more recent English translation is Attridge/Hills 2010.

miracles or utters wise speeches. They are usually considered to have arisen, at least partially, in a Gnostic context,³ with one of their main threads being support for strict continence, like the Encratites.⁴

In some episodes, animals play a major role. The relationship of the Apostle to certain animals has a moral aim, and they are not mere partners or secondary characters in the plot, but are crucial for the doctrinal lesson of each passage. Some of these animals are even given a language similar to that of humans, and their speech and attitude convey the moral of the Apostle's preaching.

We shall not focus on the possible spiritual meanings of these animals from the point of view of the Christian message of the book, but on the reception of these stories by an audience containing both literate and illiterate people. The Acts are not sophistic literature, there are no complicated compositional elements such as are found in the novels of the Second Sophistic, and they are not a cultivated piece of knowledge such as the writings of Tatian or Origen. They are plain stories (which is not to say a plain doctrine), simple narratives which, if taken only at face value, may be quite easy to understand. Matthews calls it a "proletarian literature"⁵ and indeed they are far removed from the educated texts of the 3rd century. On the other hand, there are many possible layers of interpretation, and the simplicity of the text should not preclude a deeper understanding.

But even if we take into account this apparent formal simplicity, we might ask ourselves about the audience and the reception of such a text. The current interpretations mainly seek the Christian or Jewish-Christian context of meaning,⁶ because, among other reasons, *Act. Thom.* are supposed to have originated in a Syriac environment,⁷ although the Acts are written in Greek and were read (and heard) in Greek. The audience may well have been acquainted with other works

3 The Gnostics were groups claiming a special knowledge of God and Salvation. They believed in a supreme perfect God and a malevolent, lesser divinity, who created matter, which is evil. There was a strong controversy in the Early Church regarding these groups. For the Gnostic connections of *Act. Thom.*, cf. Bornkamm 1964, 300.

4 The Encratites (or "self-controlled") were 2nd-century Christians who supported a very extreme ascetic life, forbidding sex and meat, and drinking only water. They were mostly related to Gnostic sects. Many prominent Christian intellectuals (such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, or Hippolytus of Rome) considered them heretical.

5 Matthews 1999, 205.

6 Bornkamm 1964; Klijn 2003; Adamik 2001, regarding the serpent.

7 According to van Dijk 1996 and Bremmer 2001, 78, though other opinions on the subject are possible. See Roig Lanzillotta 2015; Narro/Muñoz Gallarte 2022.

of commonly known literature and with the tradition of some Greek story-characters. This is where animals and fables play a significant role.⁸

Speaking animals are a feature of fables, and often dialogue occurs between a human and an animal, or if there is no dialogue there is some kind of interaction. Even if they do not speak, some animals already have a reputation, not only in fables but also in Greek literature, and they are part of the audience's traditional background.

Therefore, it is not obvious that the episodes of the Acts should be understood only in a spiritual or Christian sense, especially since they are non-liturgical texts, aiming to convey Christian knowledge through a narrative rich in adventures.⁹ In the 3rd century, and even in the fourth, Christianity was a powerful religious trend but was immersed in a polytheistic context, in which cultural references were not established univocally. Orality still played a great role in learning, not only because most people were illiterate, but because even among cultivated people reading aloud or learning by listening was usual.¹⁰ In people's educational background, a great deal of knowledge was stored by hearing, seeing performances at the theatre or at the pantomime, telling tales and stories, listening to readings, and chattering in families' private rooms. We rely on extant texts and archaeology to find out what the ancients thought, knew, believed, and feared, but a large proportion of their actual points of reference is lost because they were not recorded in any material medium. In the 3rd century, this immaterial knowledge was composed of the tradition of classical authors and the innovation of Christian stories. Although the Christian texts of the Old and New Testament were widespread and read during liturgies, they may not yet have been so well known as to form a mass of immediately remembered material. Christianity at that time was a novelty, not a deep-rooted *Weltanschauung*. All kinds of memories and tales merged in a single image when listening to a Christian text, and other popular stories such as the Acts added more content to the sometimes bare narratives of the liturgy. Fables as part of the Graeco-Roman literary background are thus also present in the reading of Christian texts. Speaking animals may have raised certain expectations in a reader who had an image of the animal's role both in fables and in other allegorical or symbolic works such as the *Physiologus*.

Certainly, the following episodes of *Act. Thom.* are not properly fables and have at first sight an obvious precedent in Old or New Testament texts, at least for

⁸ It is even possible to think of a Syriac origin for Babrius' fables in the 2nd–3rd century. Cf. Spielhofer 2023, 12–18, and Luzzato 1997, 383.

⁹ Spittler 2012, 65; Pervo 1987.

¹⁰ Cf. especially Upton 2006.

the modern reader; but for the ancient audience, the available meaning was much wider, and this is what we try to present here.

2 Speaking animals in *Act. Thom.*

2.1 The ass

There are three main episodes where speaking animals play a significant role in *Act. Thom.*: Act 3, with the snake; Act 4, with the foal of an ass; and Act 8, with wild asses and the long speech of a single ass. Act 4 and Act 8 often share features and they are sometimes taken to be doublets by some critics.¹¹ Many allegorical interpretations have been offered for both episodes, mainly by Bornkamm, who sees the colt in Act 4 as an allegory of the human body, and Spittler, who interprets both animals (the domestic and the wild one) as opposites and as an allegory of sexual continence.¹² Given the Encratite character of *Act. Thom.*, this approach is not impossible, but it may not be the only one or, at least, some nuances could be added to it.

Generally in Greek Antiquity asses were supposed to be stupid animals, bearing a great burden and all kinds of misfortunes in life for a minimal reward (or no reward at all). In Aristophanes' *Ranae*, the initial scene has Xanthias on a donkey playing jokes on Dionysus. It is an everyday scene: asses are expected to silently carry human beings and burdens. Xanthias complains about his own burden, although he is comfortably riding on the ass. He also complains of his lack of participation in the Mysteries, and he feels 'like an ass': νή τὸν Δί' ἐγὼ γοῦν ὄνος ἄγω μυστήρια ("I'm the damn donkey who carries out the Mysteries", Ar. *Ran.* 159; transl. Henderson). According to Aristophanes, Apollo made ass's ears grow on Midas on account of his bad choice of music: νή τοὺς θεοὺς Μίδαις μὲν οὖν, ἦν ὥτ' ὄνου λάβητε ("O yes, you'll all be Midases if only you've the asses' ears", Ar. *Plut.* 287; transl. Rogers). Ass's ears are still seen a sign of stupidity today! However, donkeys were considered no better in proverbs and sayings: περὶ ὄνου σκιᾶς ("for the shadow of an ass") means 'for a trifle, for nothing', as in Plato:

ὅταν οὖν ὁ ῥητορικὸς ἀγνοῶν ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακόν, λαβὼν πόλιν ὡσαύτως ἔχουσιν πείθῃ, μὴ περὶ "ὄνου σκιᾶς" ὡς ἵππου τὸν ἔπαινον ποιούμενος, ἀλλὰ περὶ κακοῦ ὡς ἀγαθοῦ, δόξας δὲ

11 Cf. the very interesting approach of Spittler 2008, 220–222.

12 Cf. Bornkamm 1933, 37; Spittler 2008, 211–212.

πλήθους μεμελετηκῶς πείσῃ κακὰ πράττειν ἀντ' ἀγαθῶν, ποῖόν τιν' ἂν οἶε μετὰ ταῦτα τὴν ῥητορικὴν καρπὸν ὧν ἔσπειρε θερίζειν;

(Pl. *Phdr.* 260c–d)

Socrates: Then when the orator who does not know what good and evil are undertakes to persuade a state which is equally ignorant, not by praising the “shadow of an ass” under the name of a horse, but by praising evil under the name of good, and having studied the opinions of the multitude persuades them to do evil instead of good, what harvest do you suppose his oratory will reap thereafter from the seed he has sown?

(Transl. Fowler)

Plato goes on quoting (and modifying)¹³ another proverb, ἀπ' ὄνου καταπεσεῖν (“as if you had fallen from an ass”; transl. Hickie; or “I’d say you fell off your rocker”, Ar. *Nub.* 1273; transl. Henderson), as a way to stress someone’s clumsiness. Cf. also κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν ἀπὸ τινος ὄνου πεσεῖν (“get a toss off the donkey [as the saying goes]”, Pl. *Leg.* 701d; transl. Bury).

The animal also has an element of wantonness, as in Xenophon: ὁμολογῶ καὶ τῶν ὄνων ὑβριστότερος εἶναι, οἷς φασιν ὑπὸ τῆς ὑβρεως κόπον οὐκ ἐγγίγνεσθαι (“I admit that I am more wanton even than the ass, which, because of its wantonness, so the saying runs, is not subject to fatigue”, Xen. *An.* 5.8.3; transl. Brownson).

Also wanton and uncomplaining is the ass of Semonides’ *Iambs about Women* fr. 7.43–49 West, quite different from asses in Aesop, which are more envious of other people’s fortunes, but as stubborn or clumsy as his Aristophanic relatives (Aesop. 82 P. [= 84 Hsr.; 269 Ch.]; 149 P. [= 154 Hsr.; 210 Ch.]), or ridiculous (151 P. [= 156 Hsr.; 209 Ch.]). Onagers (wild asses) are not much better in fables: their main characteristics are being bad company or lacking perspicacity (Babr. 67).

The fable about a donkey carrying a statue deserves special mention.

ὄνῳ τις ἐπιθεῖς ἄγαλμα ἤλαυνεν εἰς πόλιν. πάντων δὲ τῶν συναντώντων προσκυνούντων τῷ ἀγάλματι ὑπολαβὼν ὁ ὄνος, ὅτι αὐτῷ προσκυνοῦσιν, ἀναπτρωθεὶς ὠγκᾶτο καὶ οὐκέτι περαιτέρω προβαίνειν ἐβούλετο. καὶ ὁ ὄνηλάτης αἰσθόμενος τὸ γεγονός τῷ ῥοπάλῳ αὐτὸν παίων ἔφη· “ὦ κακὴ κεφαλὴ, ἔτι καὶ τοῦτο λοιπὸν ἦν ὄνον ὑπ’ ἀνθρώπων προσκυνεῖσθαι.”

(Aesop. 182 P. [= 193 Hsr.; 267 Ch.])

Someone put an image of a god on an ass and led him to the city. Along the way many people meeting them bowed down to the image, and the ass, thinking that they were bowing to him, was puffed up with pride, brayed loudly, and refused to advance any farther. When the driver saw what had happened he beat the ass with a club, saying: “Miserable creature, did this too remain for me to experience, to behold you, an ass, bowed down to by men?”

(Transl. Perry)

¹³ At least, that is what Timaeus Sophista says, *Lexicon Platonicum* 977b.

He feels particularly proud of (supposedly) being adored by the crowd, which is actually adoring the statue. He is carrying not a man, as he usually does, but the image of a god, and thinks himself the object of veneration. Being preposterous and overvaluing his own qualities is another form of *hybris*, as of stupidity.

In *Act. Thom.*, Act 4, the colt, son of an ass, plays the opposite role: he wants to carry a man who, by his (the colt's) own confession, is the image of divinity, i.e. the representative of God. He is aware of the Apostle's identity.¹⁴

Ὁ δίδυμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ ἀπόστολος τοῦ ὑψίστου καὶ συμμύστης τοῦ λόγου τοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀποκρύφου, ὁ δεχόμενος αὐτοῦ τὰ ἀπόκρυφα λόγια, ὁ συνεργὸς τοῦ υιοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὃς ἐλευθερὸς ὢν γέγονας δοῦλος καὶ πραθεὶς πολλοὺς εἰς ἐλευθερίαν εἰσήγαγες· ὁ συγγενὴς τοῦ μεγάλου γένους τοῦ τὸν ἔχθρον καταδικάσαντος καὶ τοὺς ἰδίους λυτρωσαμένου, ὁ πρόφασις τῆς ζωῆς πολλοῖς γενόμενος ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῶν Ἰνδῶν· ἦλθες γὰρ πρὸς τοὺς πλανωμένους ἀνθρώπους [...].

(*Act. Thom.* 39.1)

Twin of the Messiah and Apostle of the Most High, and sharer in the hidden word of the Life-giver, and receiver of the secret mysteries of the Son of God; freeborn, who became a slave, to bring many to freedom by your obedience; son of a great family, who became bereaved, that by the power of your Lord, you might deprive the enemy of many, so that you might become the cause of life to the country of the Indians; (you) who came against your will to men who were straying from God [...].

(Transl. Klijn)

And his faith is far more robust than that of the other followers or companions of the Apostle. The ass, instead of complaining about the burden of a rider, insists on having Thomas on his back. The Apostle, at first, does not acknowledge the animal as a speaking partner: his first words are to praise God. But then he turns to the ass and asks about his origins and the reason for his speech. The ass's lineage goes back as far as Balaam's, and he also recalls that one of his ancestors was ridden by Jesus entering Jerusalem. The animal insists on having Thomas on his back, whereas usually asses do not appreciate bearing a burden. In the end, the Apostle reluctantly rides the donkey, because he is not Jesus, but from the ass's point of view the honour of being ridden by him is comparable to that of his ancestor.

As Susanne Talabardon has pointed out, asses play a very positive role in the Jewish tradition. They are often "entscheidende Wendepunkte des Geschehens

¹⁴ Here we follow the Greek version only. In the Syriac version, the Apostle prays that speech be given to the ass. It is not absolutely clear that the Syriac version is older, as recent research postulates a Greek origin for *Act. Thom.*, cf. Narro/Muñoz Gallarte 2022; Roig Lanzillotta 2015.

zwischen dem Ewigen und seinem Volk.”¹⁵ Probably *Act. Thom.* is no exception, but it is a Greek text, originating in a Gnostic context and targeting an audience far wider than just Jews (or perhaps with no Jews at all in it). The resonance of the stories about asses was not with the Berakhot or rabbinic literature,¹⁶ which would have been quite unknown outside Jewish circles, but with the more widespread and familiar tales of stubborn or stupid animals as they appear in fable literature, although even fable offers intelligent asses, as in Phaed. *app.* 12 Z. [= *app.* 14 G.].

The whole passage looks like a reversal of the usual character of an ass: instead of being stupid and clumsy, he is perceptive and discerning, instead of knowing nothing or thinking slowly, he is sharp and clear-eyed, his knowledge of divine things is far superior to that of the humans in this chapter. Speaking asses in Greek literature (especially in fables) are far from clever, but the well-educated ass in this episode would certainly remind a Christian audience, familiar with the liturgical texts of the Old Testament, of Balaam;¹⁷ however, in the 3rd century these were not (and perhaps not primarily) the sole point of reference or relevant background. For the Greek audience of *Act. Thom.*, asses were asses, both the Aristophanic or the Aesopic ones, they were the dumb characters of the proverbs or the shameful punishment of a stupid deed. Nobody would expect a donkey to recognize the power of God in the way this one does, so the contrast is all the more striking; in fact, he must explicitly recall its biblical ancestors, which perhaps has a didactic aim. It is certainly a Christian text, but in the 3rd century the common Christian background was perhaps not as common as it would be a couple of centuries later, so the ass's lineage would not have been part of the audience's immediate memories. Every Greek listener or reader could easily associate asses in a text with stupidity, but not necessarily every Greek listener or reader would have immediately associated an ass with Balaam or Palm Sunday. These are the centuries when a new intellectual background was arising, in what could be called the ‘substitution of mythologies’. The contrast between the ordinary image of an ass and the role of this particular ass (however noble his ancestors

¹⁵ Talabardon 2013, 114 (“decisive turning points in the events between the Eternal One and his people”).

¹⁶ The Berakhot (Blessings) is a Jewish treatise on blessings and prayers and their liturgical use, composed in the first two centuries of the CE, i.e. quite close to the Christian Apocryphal Acts.

¹⁷ LXX Nu. 22.28–35.

were) is therefore sharper and more shocking, and makes the message more impressive.¹⁸

2.2 The onager

Something similar can be said about Act 8, which Spittler reads as a doublet of the one discussed above,¹⁹ although we find a great difference between them. In Act 8, the animals are wild asses, which again play a very different role from that of humans — more enlightened, cultivated, and cleverer than the people in the story.

Onagers make fewer appearances than asses in Greek literature. They belong to the wild, whereas the humble donkey is the most punished animal of the household. The thoughtful onager of Aesop's fable 183 P. [= 194 Hsr.; 265 Ch.], who reckons he is luckier than his sleek but overworked cousin, signifies this qualitative distance, which is also presented in the episode of *Act. Thom.*²⁰

ὄνος ἄγριος ὄνον ἡμερον θεασάμενος ἐν τινι εὐηλίῳ τόπῳ προσελθὼν ἐμακάριζεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῇ εὐεξίᾳ τοῦ σώματος καὶ τῇ τῆς τροφῆς ἀπολαύσει. ὕστερον δὲ ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ἀχθοφοροῦντα καὶ τὸν ὀνηλάτην ὀπισθεν ἐπόμενον καὶ ῥοπάλοις αὐτὸν παίοντα εἶπεν· “ἀλλ’ ἐγὼγε οὐκέτι σε εὐδαιμονίζω. ὁρῶ γάρ, ὅτι οὐκ ἄνευ κακῶν μεγάλων τὴν ἀφθονίαν ἔχεις.”

(Aesop. 183 P. [= 194 Hsr.; 265 Ch.])

A wild ass, seeing a tame one in a sunny place, went up to him and congratulated him on his physical well-being and the good feeding that he enjoyed. But later, when he saw him carrying a heavy burden and his driver following behind and beating him with a club, he said to the tame ass, “Oho! I’m not congratulating you any more, for I see that the abundance you enjoy is at the cost of great woes.”

(Transl. Perry)

There are two parts to the episode in *Act. Thom.* In the first one, the animals show their intelligence and understanding but do not speak. This could be understood as a miracle, that is, as the way someone with divine power can subjugate nature. But in the second part of the episode a wild ass speaks, and with superior knowledge (as in the case of the colt), but also with divine power. He addresses not the Apostle, as in the former episode, but the evil spirits, the enemies of Jesus, who have possessed the body of a woman. At first it is not the Apostle, but the ass

¹⁸ For the Christian interpretation of the ass as a humble animal in Augustine, i.e. two centuries later, see Cox Miller 2018, 53.

¹⁹ Spittler 2008, 203 and 208, following Bornkamm 1933, 35.

²⁰ Cf. Adrados 1985, 218.

who addresses the devil. His speech is long and aggressive: thus he is an animal with authority, a feature not present in Act 4, where the colt was humble. At the end of this first speech, the onager directly embodies the personality of Thomas, even if in the third person. The Apostle has not yet said a word. He will confirm the exorcism with a few words after the onager's speech, but the first command to abandon the woman's body does not come from him, but from the wild ass in the Apostle's name. A couple of pages later, when the demons have already left the woman and the scene, the onager addresses the Apostle and bids Thomas to follow his mission and afterwards he addresses the whole audience (which has witnessed the miraculous healing of the possessed woman), explaining the difference between false and true prophets, using a very common image: a false apostle is like a wolf covered with a sheep's skin, greedy, ambitious, and mendacious.

What kind of resonance would this episode evoke in the audience of *Act. Thom.*? Spittler²¹ read the episode in terms of sexual continence (Encratism), quoting *Physiologus* 9, where onagers castrate their offspring. Even if the text of the *Physiologus* points towards an issue of male power rather than of continence, in our opinion, this interpretation is possible.²² But if the *Physiologus* is to be taken as a reference point, there is another significant text about the same animal, *Physiologus* 45, where the onager is called a devil because he is the impersonation of the night and therefore has a bad reputation, more consonant with the serpent than the ass in the *Act. Thom.*

On the other hand, Oenomaus (*fr.* 12.41), followed by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Praep. evang.* 5.34.3), places onagers at an almost immortal level. Certainly, these texts are displaying a disdain for boxers and their being considered divine beings: onagers could do as well, the writers say, and so would asses. But the comparison with the ass in these texts points towards the previously mentioned contempt for asses as stupid animals: "Asses could do as well as you do!" Onagers, in the context, play a more distinguished role: if asses are supposed to be gods, onagers are the best of the gods. Regardless of the castigation, this text is interesting because it stresses a qualitative difference between asses and onagers: wild asses are nobler, more elevated, more cultivated beings than domestic donkeys. The text of *Act. Thom.* may be based on this difference. The donkey of Act 4, however aristocratic his biblical ancestors were, is a domestic animal, destined to carry someone on his

²¹ Spittler 2008, 214–216.

²² Nevertheless, the onager is not always considered a chaste animal, especially according to Opp. *Cyn.* 3.191–193, where he states that they are ζηλήμονα ("prone to jealousy") and that they are πολλαῖσιν τ' ἀλόχοισιν ἀγαλλόμενοι ("glorying in many wives"; transl. Mair), which would rather support an interpretation of *Physiologus* 9 in terms of male power rather than continence.

back, as he is destined to carry all kinds of burdens, according to many Aesopic fables. His wisdom (contrasting with his supposed stupidity) allows him to recognize the superiority of Thomas the Apostle, and so to ask him for the honour of being ridden by the Apostle of Christ. This is its greater achievement; his confession of faith has no other aim than to show the clumsiness of human beings who are not capable of recognizing the servant of God when they see him. The clear-sightedness of the ass, a stupid animal, is opposed to the stupidity of men, usually considered the most intelligent beings. The wild asses of Act 8, on the other hand, go a step further. Occupying a higher position than their domestic relatives, they (or rather he, since there is only one onager speaks, but on behalf of all of them) are entitled to speak on behalf of the Apostle himself, to address demons, and, finally, to summon the Apostle and instruct the audience. They are equipped with a higher wisdom and, above all, with power. It is possible that the bad reputation conveyed by *Physiologus* 45 also plays a role in this: the incarnation of the devil is capable of calling out demons as soon as he has reversed his foul condition and acknowledged the true Christ. Nevertheless, we do not think too much attention should be paid to this passage of the *Physiologus*, given its connections with astrology and Egyptian science, although we cannot reject it altogether either.

As in fable 183 P., quoted above, wild asses are free, and freedom is one of their most praised qualities, far removed from the poor enslaved asses. And, just as onagers are free, so are Christians who have fully devoted themselves to the doctrine, and this freedom supplies them with extra wisdom and power.

2.3 The snake

On the other hand, Act 31 features another speaking animal, but of a very different sort, the snake, δράκων μέγας. It is hardly necessary to describe his negative connotations in Christian literature: a snake led Eve (and Adam) astray in Paradise, and a similar snake is the monster of the Book of Revelation. They are no better in Greek literature: snakes do not have a good reputation (although in Greek mythology, where ambiguity is strong, we could nuance this statement). A δράκων or its relatives is usually a hostile being, the antagonist of the heroes: Pytho, killed by Apollo; the snake of the Hesperides guarding the golden apples stolen by Heracles; the snake of Colchis guarding the Golden Fleece and killed by Jason; the snakes in the basket kept by the Aglaurides in Athens; the snakes at Heracles birth, etc. In this case, the Greeks had no need to change their minds when becoming Christians. Snakes were foul, and they could even incarnate the Devil himself, when it came to give a shape to evil. In fables, perfidy and treachery win over the poor innocent animals, as in Aesop. 192 P. [= 206 Hsr.; 286 Ch.] and

especially 196 P. [= 211 Hsr.; 290 Ch.] and 221 P. [= 248 Hsr.; 122 Ch.], and Babr. 118. Embodying evil is also the snakes' role in fables, and we may perhaps quote Aesop. 221 P. as an outstanding example:

τοῦ Διὸς γαμοῦντος πάντα τὰ ζῶα ἀνήνεγκαν δῶρα. ὄφης δὲ ἔρπων ρόδον ἀναλαβὼν τῷ στόματι ἀνέβη. ἰδὼν δὲ αὐτὸν ὁ Ζεὺς εἶπε· “τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων καὶ ἐκ ποδῶν δῶρα δέχομαι· ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ σοῦ στόματος οὐδὲν λαμβάνω.”

(Aesop. 221 P. [= 248 Hsr.; 122 Ch.])

When Zeus married, all the animals brought gifts to his wedding. Among them was a snake, who, taking a rose in his mouth, crept up to Olympus. On seeing him Zeus said: “From all the others I accept gifts, even when presented by their feet, but from your mouth I take nothing.”

(Transl. Perry)

The animal in the text of *Act. Thom.* is not different; the snake is really a foe, and he is called so from the start, in Act 32. The Adversary does not act through any living creature but that one. Nevertheless, the speaking snake utters a speech that is worth looking at. We would expect rage and fury from his words, denial and insult, yet the terms of the conversation with the Apostle are quite different. In Act 33, he starts with a proud enumeration of the deeds of his ancestors (as the ass does in Act 4), including an interesting description of cosmological serpents, probably originating in a Gnostic²³ milieu and not unknown to the Greeks.²⁴

Ἐγὼ ἐρπυστὴς ἐρπυστοῦ φύσεως καὶ βλαπτικὸς βλαπτικοῦ· υἱὸς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ βλάψαντος καὶ πλήξαντος τοὺς τέσσαρας ἀδελφοὺς τοὺς ἐστῶτας· υἱὸς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ καθεζομένου ἐπὶ θρόνου εἰς τὴν ὑπ' οὐρανόν, τοῦ τὰ ἴδια λαμβάνοντος ἀπὸ τῶν δανειζομένων· υἱὸς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ τὴν σφαῖραν ζωννύοντος· συγγενὴς δέ εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ ἐξωθεν τοῦ ὠκεανοῦ ὄντος, οὗ ἡ οὐρὰ ἐγκείται τῷ ἰδίῳ στόματι· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ διὰ τοῦ φραγμοῦ εἰσελθὼν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ καὶ μετὰ Εὐᾶς λαλήσας ὅσα ὁ πατήρ μου ἐνετείλατό μοι λαλήσαι αὐτῇ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἐξάψας καὶ πυρώσας Κάϊν ἵνα ἀποκτείνῃ τὸν ἴδιον ἀδελφόν, καὶ δι' ἐμὲ ἀκανθαὶ καὶ τρίβολοι ἐφύησαν ἐν τῇ γῇ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ τοὺς ἀγγέλους ἄνωθεν κάτω ρίψας καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν γυναικῶν αὐτοὺς καταδήσας, ἵνα γηγενεῖς παῖδες ἐξ αὐτῶν γένωνται καὶ τὸ θέλημά μου ἐν αὐτοῖς διαπράξωμαι· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ τὴν καρδίαν Φαραὼ σκληρύνας, ἵνα τὰ τέκνα τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ φονεύσῃ καὶ ἐν ζυγῷ σκληρότητος καταδουλώσῃται αὐτούς· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ τὸ πλῆθος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ πλανήσας, ὅτε τὸν μόσχον ἐποίησαν· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ τὸν Ἡρώδη πυρώσας καὶ τὸν Καϊάφαν ἐξάψας ἐν τῇ ψευδογορίᾳ τοῦ ψεύδους ἐπὶ Πιλάτου· τοῦτο γὰρ ἐμοὶ ἔπρεπεν· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ τὸν Ἰούδαν ἐξάψας καὶ ἐξαγοράσας ἵνα τὸν Χριστὸν θανάτῳ παραδῷ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ τὴν ἄβυσσον τοῦ ταρτάρου

²³ Among some of the Gnostic sects, the evil god or demiurge adopted the form of a serpent. There was a strong controversy in the first two centuries CE concerning Gnostics, considered to be heretics by the orthodox Church. Some groups were called Ophites or Ophians because of the speculations about the serpent in Genesis.

²⁴ Adamik 2001, 118: “the speech [...] is a complex treatise on the serpent.”

οἰκῶν καὶ κατέχων, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἄκοντά με ἡδίκησεν καὶ τοὺς ἰδίους ἐξ ἑμοῦ ἐξελέξατο· συγγενὴς εἰμι ἐκείνου τοῦ μέλλοντος ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνατολῆς ἔρχεσθαι, ᾧ καὶ ἐξουσία δίδεται ποιῆσαι ὅπερ αὐτὸς βούλεται ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

(*Act. Thom.* 32)

I am a reptile, the son of reptile, and harmer, the son of harmer: I am the son of him, to whom power was given over (all) creatures, and he troubled them. I am the son of him, who makes himself like to God to those who obey him, that they may do his will. I am the son of him, who is ruler over everything that is created under heaven. I am the son of him, who is outside of the ocean, and whose mouth is closed. I am the kinsman of him, who spoke with Eve, and through her made Adam transgress the commandment of God. And I am he who incited Cain to slay his brother. And on my account, — because of this I was created, — the earth was cursed and thorns grew up in it. I am he who dared, and cast down the just from their height, and corrupted them through the lust of women; and they begat some large of body, and I worked in them my will. And I am he who hardened the heart of Pharaoh, that he might slay the children of Israel, and keep them down in hard slavery. I am he who led the people astray in the desert, when I subdued them so that they made for themselves the calf. I am he who stirred up Caiaphas and Herod by slander against the righteous Judge. I am he who caused Judas to take the bribe, when he was made subject to me, that he might deliver up the Messiah to death. I am he to whom the power of this world was given, and the son of Mary²⁵ has seized me by force and taken what was his from me. I am the kinsman of him, who is to come from the east, to whom the power is given.

(Transl. Klijn)

The text of *Act. Thom.* has a strong inclination towards Gnostic ideas, especially regarding Encratism and a certain contempt for matter, but it is firmly embedded in a Christian cosmology. This text may also bear witness to a certain struggle with — or deviance from — other more exaggerated Gnostic trends of the 2nd century. Gnosticism is a modern word in general use by scholars, but it does not refer to ancient reality with great accuracy. This is not the proper place to discuss the Gnostic content of *Act. Thom.*, but the passage helps to stress the differences from some old cosmologies that involved snakes.

After recalling all the superb — and ominous — deeds of its ancestors, starting from the cosmogonic snake up to the biblical ones, such as the one in Paradise, and from there to the betrayal of Judas, the snake mentions the Son of God, who took some of his followers from among its companions, against its own will. This point seems interesting: the evil nature of the animal persists, but its words show not only submission, but also recognition of the power of Christ. One would expect denial; instead, the snake agrees — even if reluctantly — that Christ is the Son of

25 The Greek text says “the Son of God”; Klijn translates “the Son of Mary”, matching other passages, cf. Klijn 2003, 95 and 226.

God and that the Apostle acts on his behalf. He obeys the order of the Apostle (to suck the venom from a young man's wound), even if it means his own death, but he utters another similar message first: οὐπω ὁ καιρὸς ἔφθασεν τοῦ τέλους ἡμῶν ("The time of our end has not arrived yet", *Act. Thom.* 33). There is a time for its end and for all the creatures of its family. It will end πρὸ καιροῦ ("before time", *Act. Thom.* 33), i.e. he acknowledges the superior power of Christ (or the Apostle). His lineage is enslaved to the Christian God, as he has already acknowledged in Act 31:

[...] καὶ ἀκολουθήσας αὐτῇ ἐπετήρουν· καὶ εὔρον τοῦτον τὸν νεανίαν καταφιλοῦντα αὐτήν, ὃς καὶ ἐκοινώνησεν αὐτῇ καὶ ἄλλα αἰσχρὰ διεπράξατο μετ' αὐτῆς· κάμοι μὲν εὐκόλα ἦν αὐτὰ ἐπὶ σοῦ ἐκφάναι, οἶδα γάρ σε δίδυμον ὄντα τοῦ Χριστοῦ [there is a Syriac variant] τὸν τὴν φύσιν ἡμῶν ἀεὶ καταργοῦντα· ταράξει δὲ ταύτην μὴ βουλευθεὶς αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ οὐκ ἐθανάτωσα αὐτόν, ἀλλ' ἐπιτηρησάμενος αὐτόν ἐσπέρας διερχόμενον τύψας ἐθανάτωσα αὐτόν, καὶ μάλιστα κατατολήσαντα αὐτόν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦτο διαπράξασθαι.

(*Act. Thom.* 31)

[...] and I went after her, and saw the youth kissing her, and he also slept with her, and did other things with her which are unseemly, — easy for me (to say), but to you I do not dare to utter them, because I know that the ocean-flood of the Messiah will destroy our nature.²⁶ And in order that I might not alarm her, I did not kill him at that time, but I watched him, and in the evening, when he passed by me, I struck him, and killed him, and especially because he had dared to do this thing on the Sunday".

(Transl. Klijn)

It is a new telling of the usual myth, where heroes fight snakes and kill or defeat them, but here the weapon is neither a sword nor a poison but the commanding word of the Apostle. At the same time, it is the reversal of the popular tales about snakes, as quoted above. In *Act. Thom.*, the snake is defeated, he acknowledges a superior power capable of beating his treachery, he confesses the faith, even if against his own will. In fact, all these texts are evidence of a struggle for power, the power of Christian characters over the different magicians, fortune tellers, and miracle workers (θαυματουργοί) who belong to the evil side. The δράκων, among all living creatures, is the best incarnation of this evil, and therefore his submission to the Apostle means acknowledgement of the true power. The texts may have a strong Gnostic flavour, but they are certainly not Manichaean: there is a supreme power, the new God, who defeats all other gods and demons. This is the

²⁶ The Greek text says "for I know that you are the twin brother of Christ"; Klijn (2003, 92) translates the text according to the Syriac variant "the ocean-flood of the Messiah". About the Greek or Syrian origin of *Act. Thom.*, cf. n. 7. Both readings are useful for our purpose.

Christian message since Paul (*Ep.Col.* 1.16). The contrast with tradition in this case lies not in the image that the snake may evoke, since he still personifies evil, but in his submission to a superior being, his confession of faith that places him on the other side, even in spite of himself. This is not a unique case; on the contrary, in early Christian texts it is not uncommon to find the discourse of faith in the mouth of the adversaries,²⁷ but in *Act. Thom.* such an attitude, apparently opposed to what the animal represented, must have been particularly surprising. For some Church Fathers, animals were already a cliché, they already attributed to them qualities that configured a more-or-less fixed character. Clement of Alexandria²⁸ compares mankind to animals, according to their faults rather than their qualities, and Tertullian, the great detractor of pantomime and theatrical performances — which must have been the major transmitters of popular clichés across all social classes — uses animals to express his displeasure.²⁹

3 Intelligent animals?

We might also bear in mind that among the Greeks there was an intellectual debate over animal rationality.³⁰ According to Aristotle's *De anima*,³¹ animals do not have intellect, νοῦς, but in *Historia animalium* he supposes that many animals have something like intelligent understanding: τῆς περὶ τὴν διάνοιαν συνέσεως ἔνεισιν ἐν πολλοῖς αὐτῶν ὁμοιότητες (“present in many of them together with resemblances of intelligent understanding”, Arist. *Hist. an.* 588a23–24; transl. Balme), or in 612a he says that other animals use intelligence for their benefit: ποιεῖ πρὸς βοήθειαν αὐτοῖς φρονίμως (“many other animals [...] act intelligently too to help themselves”, Arist. *Hist. an.* 612a; transl. Balme). On the other hand, Stoics deny that animals possess any reason. Epictetus says:

ὁ ὄνος ἐπεὶ γέγονεν μὴ τι προηγουμένως; οὐ: ἀλλ' ὅτι νώτου χρεῖαν. εἶχομεν βαστάζειν τι δυναμένου. ἀλλὰ νῆ Δία καὶ περιπατοῦντος αὐτοῦ χρεῖαν εἶχομεν: διὰ τοῦτο προσεῖληφε καὶ τὸ χρῆσθαι φαντασίαις; ἄλλως γὰρ περιπατεῖν οὐκ ἐδύνατο. [8] καὶ λοιπὸν αὐτοῦ που πέπνυται. εἰ δὲ καὶ αὐτός που προσεῖλήφει παρακολούθησιν τῇ χρήσει τῶν φαντασιῶν, καὶ

²⁷ One of the best examples, although probably later than *Act. Thom.*, is the apocryphal *Descent of Christ into the Underworld*, in which Hades and Death acknowledge the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

²⁸ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 1.4.1.

²⁹ Tert. *De spect.* 2.1; 8.1.

³⁰ For a broad overview of the subject, see Gilhus 2006, 37–63.

³¹ Arist. *De an.* 414b and 429a.

δῆλον ὅτι κατὰ λόγον οὐκέτ' ἂν ἡμῖν ὑπετέτακτο οὐδὲ τὰς χρείας ταύτας παρείχεν, ἀλλ' ἦν ἂν ἴσος ἡμῖν καὶ ὅμοιος.

(Arr. *Epict. diss.* 2.8.7–8)

The ass, for example, is not born to be of primary importance, is it? No, but because we had need of a back that was able to carry something. But, by Zeus, we had need that it should also be able to walk around: therefore, it has further received the faculty of using external impressions; for otherwise it would not be able to walk around. And at about that stage there was an end. But if it, like man, had somehow received the faculty of understanding the use of its external impressions, it is also clear that consequently it would no longer be subject to us, nor would it be performing these services, but would be our equal and our peer.

(Transl. Oldfather)

Could the speaking animals of *Act. Thom.* be something like ‘rational’ or at least ‘intelligent’ animals, capable of reasoning because they are almost equal to men? Or perhaps, since, they have the power of speech, they may indeed be equal to men, as Epictetus says? It is possible that there is some echo of these intellectual debates in the background of the Acts, since while their style may be uncomplicated, their doctrine is rather sophisticated. If among the Gnostics there was a debate on all the ζῶα — the living beings, that is, the animals — and if this was not only the particular concern of Epiphanes and Carpocrates,³² it would be quite easy to give the power of speech to certain animals, just to blur the apparent boundaries between irrational animals and mankind. This could easily be the case of *Act. Philipp.* for instance, but it could also apply to the other Acts. The ass and the onagers in *Act. Thom.* have somehow received the faculty of understanding, and they have become the equals of humans or, even better, the teachers of humans. Although in *Act. Thom.* there are no eucharistic animals as in *Act. Philipp.*, the same message of a global nature is conveyed.³³

4 The literary background of *Act. Thom.*

Nevertheless, the possible audience of *Act. Thom.* probably had a strongly popular background rather than an intellectual one. The Acts tell stories that could be understood at different levels, from the enigmatic hidden meanings of allegory or metaphors to the plain story of a narrative plot with a certain moral.

³² Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.2. Cf. Camps-Gaset 2022.

³³ Matthews 1999.

Aristophanes, the Aesopic corpus, but also Apuleius and Lucian, creators of the two most famous asses in literature, are the background of the Greek audience. These are not ‘popular’ writers, if there is such a category, but they belong to general knowledge or to the common reference points of literature. Their plays and stories could be told and retold, rearranged, and performed on stage in different ways, in which mime and pantomime should not be excluded; both oral tradition and written memorization played a role in the transmission of these texts. The *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius were not even one hundred years older than the *Act. Thom.*, and a similar thing could probably be said about the pseudo-Lucianic *Onos*.³⁴ Whoever listened to the marvellous speaking ass and his noble lineage could not have helped but recall what kind of characters asses really were. The contrast to the pious and wise onagers, or to the obedient and devoted colt, would have been all the more striking.³⁵

These stories with speaking animals have morals. In the three cases, there is a kind of epimythium. The first is the speech of Thomas at the end of Act 4, when the donkey dies after fulfilling its mission. Spittler’s claim that his domestic condition as a lower and uninitiated creature brings about his death, in contrast to the onagers, may not be apt.³⁶ on the contrary, in our opinion, the colt dies because he could never do anything better than what he has done as a donkey, carrying the Apostle on his back! The second one is the speech of Thomas at the end of Act 8, when he confirms with his authority the last words of the onagers, and the third one is the end of Act 3, when the snake dies of its own poison, as bad animals should, but especially as the Lord of the snakes himself (i.e. the Evil Spirit) will die when his time comes. These speaking animals are a way to represent otherness, since they do not belong to ordinary life; rather, they reverse the natural order of things. It is not humans but animals who acknowledge the true faith, in contrast to human clumsiness, and not just any animal, but the ones with a strong background in the Greek imagination.

It is difficult to speak of cultivated education related to the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. The text does not manifest any sophistic *paideia*, nor does it exhibit any quotations from classical texts except some biblical references. What is new in these texts is the Christian approach, not the general frame of plot and story-

34 On connections between these works and the fables of Phaedrus, see also Mattiacci’s contribution in this volume.

35 It is also particularly important to stress that the different collections of fables such as those of Phaedrus, Babrius, or the *Collectio Augustana* originated in the same period (between the 1st and 3rd century) and were available to the same audience.

36 Spittler 2008, 220–221.

telling. The Christian Scriptures (that is, the Jewish texts interpreted in a Christian way and the new texts of the Gospels and Paul's Epistles) were entering collective memory and gradually taking over the space that Greek education had previously occupied. For literate and cultivated circles, Greek παιδεία always maintained its privileged situation, even when replaced by a Christian point of view. But for the poorer groups of the population, education was markedly oral and took place in the preaching of the churches and in the narratives (written or oral) that gradually took the place of the old novels and the adventures of pagan heroes. However, Babrius' fables are contemporary with the Second Sophistic, and it is possible to conceive a relation to the sophistic concept of *paideia*. Nor should we underestimate the power of pantomime or mime and theatre, where the characters were clearly predefined, and comedy was strong. Tertullian, the great detractor of the stage, mentions the role of horses in chariot races and the mythological role of some animals in performances.³⁷ The animals quoted in the *Act. Thom.* are different, but they could just as well be a part of traditional performances (and surely asses were, as a source of comic elements).

5 Conclusion

The *Act. Thom.* convey a strong doctrinal meaning by recalling biblical stories, but especially by reversing the usual well-known framework of popular references transmitted in fable collections of the Imperial period, among other places. Animals, as part of the Creation, play an important role in them but not the expected role. The whole of nature is turned upside down, animals can speak and have λόγος, a type of reason that ordinary humans lack. It is a tale of wisdom and clumsiness as well as of power, where the usual characters act in a very different and unexpected way. The biblical allusions here are a novelty, which contrasts with preconceived notions about animals. Otherness is represented by the use of irrational beings playing a role opposite to their usual one in fables, even in the case of the serpent, who maintains his negative condition but becomes the herald of the new faith. At a time when collective referents were changing, and not only Christian thought but also the popular use of mental images was progressively developing, the text of the Acts must have been all the more significant for its contrast with tradition.

³⁷ Tert. *De spect.* 8.1.

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