

OF ZEBRAS & MEERKATS

Job 12:7-10, Mt 23:1-12

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In the great Asian Tsunami of December 26, 2004, what has sometimes been referred to as a “stone age” tribal group moved away from the coast before the disaster. This little clan of 105 people, classified as “hunter gatherers” and considered one of the most primitive tribes in Asia, remained essentially intact and unscathed by the tsunami. How did this Onges tribe survive?

Are there myths or legends that have been passed down through the generations that helped the people predict this disaster? Or was it their awareness of the ocean, earth, and the movement of animals – wisdom accumulated over thousands of years of inhabiting the islands?

According to a local guide named Mustafa, quoted in *National Geographic*, the spirit god Pulga is said to live on North Andaman Island, at the summit of Saddle Peak, the highest point of the archipelago. The Andamanese tribes fear him, because he punishes humans, causes storms, and “has a way with ancestors.” In Andaman mythology, Pulga caused the cataclysmic flood that separated the Andamanese from their relatives on the mainland.

But a more realistic assessment is that wisdom from oral history and the vigilant awareness of animal behaviors, demanded by their hunter-gathering lifestyle, might have prepared them to move deeper into the forests — maybe even before they felt the first trembles of the earthquake.¹

There are echoes here of biblical wisdom, of oral tradition — of what some have referred to as myth. In fact, there’s a biblical character who suggests listening to the animals. It is Zophar the Naamathite . . . a “friend” of Job’s, in the sense of “with that sort of friend, who needs enemies?”

Although Zophar interprets incorrectly what he thinks the animals would say, he does retain the more primitive culture’s attunement with nature. Zophar chides Job, saying,

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

Although the book of Job was committed to writing well past the Stone Age (both bronze and iron are mentioned in Job), nevertheless the wisdom expressed is older than its author. One can almost hear the tribal ancestors reminding both Zophar and Job that the animals have wisdom.

But I think there’s another way to “listen to the animals,” something different from hoping they will support one’s theological position, as Zophar did.

There is much to be learned about behavior in simply observing animals. Perhaps it’s the sort of learning that may have saved the Onge people during the Boxing Day Tsunami.

For instance, there’s the little-known fact that the male zebra runs at the back of his harem and colts in order to protect them. And most surprising to me, the herd runs at the pace of the slowest animal.² This behavior benefits the family or the community of animals.

Then there are the meerkats. Meerkats survive by teamwork that would make an anthill jealous! And their behavior involves the acceptance of self-sacrifice as a fairly common outcome. And how would I know this? Well, in June, 2006, Animal Planet premiered their own kind of reality show with “Meerkat Manor.” It was my kind of reality show! It had drama, tribal

warfare, romance, family rivalry, occasionally wayward teenagers, cute pups and responsible babysitters, roaming Don Juans. . . and a cast of remarkably lovable four-footed furry characters whose diets run to “tasty” scorpions and “luscious” millipedes. (I’m not speaking from experience, I’m only quoting the narrator on that!)

Perhaps the best part of Meerkat Manor is getting a peek into how a core group of 8-10 zoologists studied this species from around 2003. They were accompanied by various Ph.D. students doing field research, and the later appearance of TV crews that videotaped a particular clan of meerkats, known as the Whiskers. There were cameras that followed them underground; cameras that followed them across the Kalahari Desert; and cameras that zoomed in on romantic trysts, touching maternal scenes, & sensitive individual close-ups.

Over the first year, it was fascinating to watch the head of the Kalahari Meerkat Project, and his crew demonstrate weighing meerkats and attaching radio collars to key members of the Whiskers clan. Often there’d be one sitting on the shoulder of the researcher as he or she was being filmed. The tameness of this species provides opportunities to study the process of social learning and the development of behaviors, such as, “Do brave pups become brave adults, and why?”

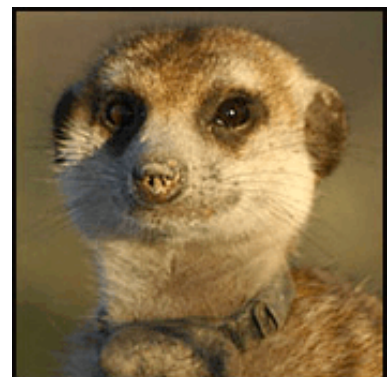
But what these scientists and flim-makers uncovered was the story of one particular meerkat matriarch named Flower. They followed her highly successful family, and the next generations of leaders from her offspring. There turned out to be enough drama to sustain several seasons of the show.

And there are things to be learned here . . . how some days you’re the adventurous forager, and somedays you are, by necessity, the fasting babysitter and guardian of the home. How it really does “take a village” of meerkats to raise the pups in the unforgiving desert. How leadership and parenthood can be fraught with danger. And the importance of vigilance, loyalty, trust, and affection.

You already know that I’ve gone completely dotty on animals. But studying such a species — one that extends grace to its human intruders; one that displays courage, discipline, and extreme family commitment; and one whose survival depends upon intelligence, strategy, cooperation, communication, and repeatedly reinforced caring relationships — studying such a species can shine just a little light on our human constructs, our families, our communities, even our church community.

I was in the company of probably millions of viewers and the entire crew of the Kalahari Meerkat Project who actually mourned the loss of Flower, the dominant leader of the featured Whiskers clan. She had proven herself in leading her cohorts in battle, securing fertile feeding grounds, and in a short period of time had grown her little gang by over 26 offspring. She died of a snakebite, bravely protecting her last brood of 3 pups.

As the announcer intoned, “Flower was larger than life. She stood tall against her foes, readily and regularly faced conflict and was a pillar of strength for her family. The desert has lost its favorite rose,” I believe that my tears were for more than a 12-inch desert creature – they were for all the brave humans and animals that I have known, and whose character could be glimpsed in Flower’s eyes. One could almost see, in the closeups her face, a bit of wisdom, of fulfillment, of love of life.³ It was the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, who said, “An animal’s eyes have the power to speak a great language.” Buber sought to create a dialogical community - a third way between individualism and collectivism - something between isolation and dispassionate objectification. He applied the dialogic, relational



way to all living things, even using a cat as one of his examples , and insisted in his book, *I and Thou*, that 'every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou'. In other words, each and every I-You relationship opens up a window to the ultimate Thou.⁴ Even a relationship with a cat. Or a long-distance engagement with a charismatic desert prairie dog.

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you.” As for humans, Jesus admonished about the scribes and Pharisees, “do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”

I daresay there are few animals, and nary a meerkat, who will not practice what they teach and pass on. If Martin Buber can see God, the eternal Thou, in the eyes of an animal, I'm willing to see a model for commitment and self-sacrifice in the Meerkats of the Kalahari Desert.

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ENDNOTES

1. www.sheldrake.org/papers/Animals/animals_tsunami.html; and “Did Island Tribes Use Ancient Lore to Evade Tsunami?” in *National Geographic News*, January 24, 2005, at http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0125_050125_tsunami_island.html. Also see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jericho> regarding the dating of “Paleolithic/Stone Age” pre-“Bronze Age” culture.

2. “Ms. Adventure” on Animal Planet, May 6, 2007.

3. Mock Obit for Flower, at <http://animal.discovery.com/fansites/meerkat/flower/flower.html>:

Flower, star of Animal Planet's popular series, Meerkat Manor, is survived by loving mate Zaphod and many children including Mozart, Mitch, Buster, Suggs and Izzy. Flower leaves behind a devastated meerkat mob now without its fearless leader. From humble beginnings, she created one of the largest, most close-knit families on the Manor. Affectionately referred to as the "Kalahari Desert Rose" by those who knew her best, she was a formidable leader and a noble mother.

Flower, born in 2000 and the matriarch to her family, the Whiskers, lived large for a 12-inch-tall meerkat. Under her reign, the Whiskers endured trials and tribulations, ranging from sibling rivalries to violent clashes with the Commandos and the Zappas, their neighboring rival families. Despite the chaos, Flower remained a source of stability for her family, often making life-or-death decisions without breaking a sweat or cracking a claw. An inspiration to her tribe, this fearless female was no "girly-girl." Flower ruled her family with an iron paw but still revealed her softer side when indulging in cuddles with her newborns or playing in the dirt.

Flower might have lived to see future generations of Whiskers if her life wasn't cut tragically short when she came face-to-masked-face with the snake that tragically dealt her final and fatal blow. Sadly, the Whiskers have felt the stinging bite of tragedy before, having lost Shakespeare, the heroic and valiant son of Flower, last winter.

The family has asked that all donations be made in Flower's name to the Fellow Earthlings' Wildlife Center.

4. Smith, Mark K. (2000) 'Martin Buber on education', the encyclopedia of informal education, <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-buber.htm>. Last update: July 02, 2008.