



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of

Andor Kelenhegyi

entitled

**The Beast between Us
The Construction of Identity and Alterity through Animal Symbolism in
Late Antique Jewish and Christian Tradition**

will be held on

Thursday, 2 November 2017, at 11:00 am

in the

**Gellner Room – Monument Building
Central European University (CEU)
Nádor u. 9, Budapest**

Examination Committee

Chair	Mária M. Kovács (CEU, Nationalism Studies Program)
Members	György Geréby (CEU, Medieval Studies Department) Carsten Wilke (CEU, Medieval Studies Department) (supervisor)
External Readers	Mireille Hadas-Lebel, Emerita, (Paris-Sorbonne University) – present Günter Stemberger, Emeritus (University of Wien) – present

The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection on the CEU e-learning site.

Should you wish to access it contact Csilla Dobos (dobos@ceu.edu)

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation

My dissertation is a study of Late Antique Jewish and Christian interrelations, with a special focus on how animal symbolism contributes to the formation of identity and alterity within the two communities. In recent decades the study of Jewish-Christian relations ceased to function only as a particular field of historical curiosity and evolved into a discipline of its own, yielding numerous influential publications. Although these focus on Jewish-Christian interrelations, their findings often have greater relevance and help transform broader scientific fields, by providing observations applicable to historical, sociological and philosophical scholarship in general.

By studying Jewish-Christian interrelations through the theme of animal symbolism, I intend to carry on with the tradition of such scholarly endeavors. However, my special focus, animal symbolism is itself part of a novel research direction, animal studies. In recent decades, animal studies has undergone a change similar to the one affecting Jewish-Christian studies, evolving into a discipline of its own rights. Since the perspective of animal studies constantly forces the scholar to reflect on human-animal relationship and the precarious nature of the boundary between the two entities, it offers a particularly fruitful vantage point to the study of the complex interrelations of Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity. Moreover, one of the major forces that triggered the emergence of animal studies as an independent field of studies during the seventies and the eighties was the conviction that the Biblical tradition, and the Judeo-Christian worldview based upon it, was responsible for millennia of exploitation and mishandling of animals. Therefore, the intersection of these two novel disciplines is expected to contribute significantly to the understanding of Jewish-Christian relations and yield results extending to various related fields.

My dissertation is driven by two research questions. On the one hand, I wish to investigate how the identification of ingroup and outgroup with animal symbols serves the process of defining and negotiating borders between Jewish and Christian communities. On the other hand, I am interested in deciding whether animal symbolism serves only as a means of creating hierarchy between dehumanized outgroups and the human ingroup or is it used also as a tool of conceptualizing the other on an equal level.

This twofold objective is achieved by studying textual sources of the two communities, focusing mainly on exegetical materials. By analyzing a wide variety of source texts from a political, theological and exegetical point of view (and infrequently also from a philological standpoint), I attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of how the two communities regarded themselves and the respective other. The geographical frame covers

the wider Mediterranean (including Greek, Latin and occasionally Syriac sources from Christian, and Hebrew and Aramaic sources from Jewish tradition). As for the time-frame, I focus exclusively on textual material from the first six centuries CE.

My dissertation comprises of a detailed introduction, four core chapters and a conclusion. The four chapters present a thematic overview of major issues relevant for the two communities' understanding of animality and animal symbolism, but at the same time they constitute a linear argumentation leading toward my major conclusion, namely that animalization was not only a tool for distancing otherness but also a way of enabling intercommunal communication, the description of otherness and the vision of interaction, proposing solutions to the permanent difficulty of the two communities' proximity and to the threat they are seen posing to each other.

A concise term of the peculiar interrelation of Jewish and Christian communities, "proximate otherness" can be very well applied to the relationship between humans and animals. The parallel between these two – similarly ambiguous – relations is a source of a particularly rich contribution to the study of Jewish-Christian interrelations. Due to its dependence on questions of defining humankind and its relationship with its environment, the study of animal symbolism allows the scholar to investigate how the mutual representation of the two traditions was related to their most profound anthropological and theological persuasions. Furthermore, both traditions draw their animal imagery either from a shared corpus of scriptures or from the shared cultural good of Graeco-Roman natural historical and mythological tradition. Therefore, the symbolic values expressed by animals are not only assets that the two communities strive for, but also a common metalanguage through which alterity can be grasped and addressed.

This zoological language has a twofold appeal for representatives of the two traditions. On the one hand, animalizing otherness helps translating intercommunity borders and differences between rivaling communities into an easily comprehensible language. By expressing difference in a zoological language, Jewish and Christian thinkers could present cultural demarcations as parts of a natural order. This can be presented in a setting of dehumanization, which depicts outgroup as animalistic, while emphasizing human traits of the ingroup. Alternatively, the outgroup in an animal form can be contrasted with an ingroup that is also represented by such a symbol. This way of presenting community relations does not rely on the narrative of dehumanization. Instead, it capitalizes on the explanatory power of the taxonomical nature of the human view of fauna. By representing both ingroup and outgroup in animal form, Christian and Jewish thinkers could bring order into chaos, depicting convoluted relationships of the human world in transparent interrelations between clearly demarcated animal species. The four chapters of my

dissertation analyze these two settings, laying a much bigger emphasis on the second, non-dehumanizing version of animal-animal contrasts.

In the first chapter, I argued that the distinction between humans and animals is far from secure and that neither rabbinic nor patristic exegetes could arrive at a set of mutually exclusive definitions of animality and humanity. Their concern with this situation shows to some extent that both communities entertained the possibility of a passable boundary between the two groups of beings. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of human-animal difference was apparently more a source of appeal than a reason to avoid this metaphorical language, and the similarity between the ambiguous relationships of humans and animals on the one hand, and Jews and Christians on the other was exploited in both exegetic traditions. Thus, the animalization of the respective other was not exclusively a tool of distancing, but also an expression of anxiety concerning the penetrable border between ingroup and outgroup.

Coupled with a similarly fundamental shift in the conceptualization of animals in the course of Late Antiquity, the ambiguity of human-animal relations was even more palpable. This fundamental shift was prompted by a number of economic and societal changes (urbanization, the transformation of sacrificial cults, a widespread tendency of emphasizing the moral aspect of religious rituals etc.) and resulted in a transformation of everyday relationship between humans and animals. This, in turn, enabled an emphasizing of symbolical and metaphorical interpretations of the scriptural narratives featuring various animal species. The second chapter is dedicated to the study of this change through the analysis of interpretations of sacrifices and the metaphorical meaning of sacrificial animals. I argue that the religious transformations of Late Antiquity, and in particular the end of sacrificial rituals, enabled a novel way of interpreting sacrificial victims. Exegetes formulated a discourse in which animals were not seen as passive objects, tools of communication between the divine and the human sphere, but voluntary victims, as suffering subjects. And although the role of sacrificial victim is still a passive one, the voluntary nature of its devotion indicates a shift toward active agency in the perception of animality. Since self-sacrifice invokes the concepts of consideration, decision and desire, metaphors featuring sacrificial animals capable of deciding to offer themselves present animal agents with a morality and a potential of comprehension. This change is most evident in the case of sheep. In certain narratives, sheep are presented as comprehending animals capable of being educated and learning proper morality. Such a metaphorical image occurs in alignment with a transformation of the image of shepherding within Jewish and, more notably, Christian tradition. I argue that from a political concept presented by the Hebrew Bible and retained in the rabbinic mindset throughout the centuries, the patristic tradition diverged toward an interpretation of shepherding as magisterium, aimed

at guiding sheep toward moral perfection. In this symbolism, sheep are not simply obedient, but become active subjects. They are not understood as being only driven toward certain goals, but – to an extent – expected to engage in self-improvement.

The increased emphasis on the morality of the individual and the search for the allegorical meaning behind both rituals and religious codes, triggered the allegorization of not only the interpretation of sacrificial animality, but also of the related dichotomy of animal purity and impurity. Since the opposition of pure and impure animality captured the interest of both Jewish and Christian exegetes, the third chapter of my dissertation is dedicated to the study of these categories. While only the rabbis maintained the validity of the distinction between the two types of animals in matters of alimentation, both exegetic traditions treated the opposites as symbols expressing identity and alterity. Due to the fact that the notion of purity is presented in the Hebrew Bible in a quasi-medical framework of contagion, contamination and purification, the identification of the outgroup with an impure animal is not only an act of classification and distancing, but also an indication of perceived danger. As the concept of impurity survived in exclusively metaphorical-moralistic terms in the Christian tradition, and since to an extent these aspects are developed in rabbinic tradition as well, the identification of the outgroup with an impure animal invoked the assumption that the other poses a danger of contaminating and defiling the ingroup in a moral sense. This was a further step in the process of subjectifying animals, since the image of an animalized other capable of seducing members of the ingroup attributes an immoral and subversive agency to animality, irrespective of whether the affected ingroup was depicted in the form of a pure animal or that of a human.

In the fourth and last chapter of the dissertation I explore the most profound expression of animal-animal comparison in the two traditions: the opposition between wild beasts of the wilderness and domesticated animals of human lands. This theme is at the same time the climax of implementing animal symbolism as an expression of intercommunal conflict, and the field within which imaginary solutions are presented to the constant threat of proximate otherness. The identification of the outgroup with wild animals is not only a representation of physical danger but also an expression of immorality, which – similarly to the contagious concept of impurity – poses a danger of corruption. The respective domains of these two groups of animals (the wilderness and human lands) are seen in a dichotomy, governed by an overtone of liminality, which enables not only the wilderness and its inhabitants to invade, occupy and devastate domesticated lands and its animal representatives, but also the domesticated animals to conquer and transform their wild counterparts. By describing the outgroup as symbolized by a wild beast and, at the same time, pointing out the possibility of its taming, exegetes of the two communities could

exploit the full potential of their subjectification of animalization. Narrative frameworks, in which both parties are identified as animal species interacting with each other provide a literary fantasy of addressing the outgroup in a secure way. By these means, interpreters of both groups could invent ways of facilitating the toleration of proximate otherness: by relegating its solution to a messianic perspective they could accommodate to leaving it intact in the present.

Since all this effort took place only on a literary level and it was addressed to one's own group, these solutions were not intended to affect the relationship of the two communities, but to construct and maintain one particular perception of it. In the two communities, the reconciliation with or removal of the animalized outgroup was mostly relegated to the eschatological future. Through arguing that the wild beasts would ultimately be removed from the land of Israel, the rabbis could make good use of their identification of the outgroup with such animals. The vision of most Christian Fathers, announcing the future coexistence and peace between wild and domesticated animals, capitalizes much more on the subjectification of animals. In this narrative, the imaginary coexistence of two types of animals (tame, but originally wild, and gentle ones) was interpreted as a description of the future peace and reconciliation of proximate others. This vision represents animals as not only subjects interacting with each other, but also as agents capable of being changed and changing each other.

My findings show that while naturalizing difference through animal symbols functioned as a method of creating boundaries, the subjectification of animals could serve an opposite aim as well. For these two communities animalization was not a tool of severing connections, but a way of potentially establishing them. By identifying communities with different animal species, the distinction between them was recognized and expressed, fostering a process of crystallizing boundaries and community identities, ultimately allowing authors to use animal symbols as an intercommunal metalanguage. Thus, by crossing over from one community to the other, animalization transgressed boundaries, but also confirmed them.

Curriculum Vitae

Studies

- 2016 Three months research grant spent in the Institut für Judaistik, Vienna Austria (supervisor: Günter Stemberger)
- 2015-2016 One-year Research Scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) at the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg, Germany (supervisor: Ronen Reichman)
- 2012-2017 PhD in Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (supervisor: Carsten L. Wilke)
- 2010-2011 MA in Medieval Studies, Central European University Budapest, Hungary
- 2004-2011 BA and MA in Hebrew Philology, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Hungary
- 2004-2011 BA and MA in History, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Hungary

Scholarships, awards

- 2015-2016 DAAD Research Scholarship at the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg, Germany
- 2015 Award for Advanced Doctoral Students, Central European University
- 2014 Academic Achievement Award for First-Year Doctoral Students, Central European University
- 2007-2008 Scholarship of the Hungarian Republic

Conference papers relevant to the Dissertation

- 2017 The Animalistic Other and the Animalistic Us. Establishing Community Boundaries between Late Antique Jewish and Christian Communities through Animal Symbolism – CEMS Graduate Conference, Budapest, Hungary (June 1-3, 2017)
- 2016 The Metaphor of Sacrificial Animals: Jews and Christians Transforming Ritual into Identity – EABS Annual Meeting, Leuven, Belgium (July 17-20, 2016)
- 2016 Facing the Other in the Wilderness – International Conference: How do we see each other? – The Abrahamic religions and interreligious relations in the past and present, Pamplona, Spain (March 10-11, 2016)
- 2015 “Do not Give what is Holy to Dogs; and Do not Throw Your Pearls before Swine” Pure and Impure Animals in Jewish and Christian Exegesis and Identity-Construction – EABS Annual Meeting, Córdoba, Spain (July 12-15, 2015)
- 2015 The Re-invention of Animal Symbolism in Rabbinic Literary Tradition – Sixth Warsaw Conference for Young Jewish Studies Researchers, Warsaw, Poland (June 17-20, 2015)

- 2014 Learning or Born to be a Sheep... a Survey of the Sheep-Shepherd Metaphor in Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis – Xth Congress of the European Association of Jewish Studies, Paris, France (July 20-24, 2014)
- 2014 The Ambivalent Lion-Metaphor: Reforming the Concept of Political Power in Rabbinic Literature – II Cracow Conference of Jewish Studies, Cracow, Poland.