

The Donkey: An Icon of Humanity

by Mohamed Kamal



Certainly God endowed man with an exalted status among His creatures, and gave him the task of subduing the animals and being His emissary on earth. However, God also set apart some of these lowlier creatures and honored them in His holy books, giving them both divine and utilitarian attributes. This brings us to the donkey, that icon of humanity that has established itself in the consciousness of countless civilizations. The donkey finds its first recorded mention in the story of a frustrated peasant, found in the seventeenth chapter of the section on ancient Egyptian literature, in the Encyclopedia of the World, written by Saleem Hassan. The events of the story take place during the reign of King Khete, a king over the city of Ahnas, around 3000 B.C. A peasant living in Natrun Valley, travelled periodically from his village to sell his produce, transported on his donkey. One day, an official named Nakht stole the peasant's donkey. The peasant complained to the official's boss, Renzy, who gathered the distinguished elders together for a hearing. When the peasant did not feel that his matter was being adequately communicated, he proceeded to dazzle Renzy and the others with an eloquent exposition of his complaints. Renzy took the peasant for an audience with the king, who ordered the peasant to repeat his astonishing presentation. This oratorical gem's inspiration was a donkey, no less.

Babylonian legends mention the goddess Lamashtu, the daughter of the sky god Anu, who was often depicted as part lioness and part donkey. Lucius Apuleius, a Roman author of African origin, wrote the classic tale "The Golden Ass". The Romans held the donkey in high esteem, and often gave it as a sacrifice to the gods. Thus the donkey came to be associated with Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture, and also with the Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. In Assyrian mythology, the goddess of death appears kneeling on a donkey crossing a river through Hell as a sacrifice to the gods.

The donkey also has its place in the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We see it in the story of Aziz that appears in the Sura of the Cow in the Quran. Aziz, a righteous Jew who had memorized the Torah, died for over a hundred years. He was brought back to life, only to find that his food had remained untouched and unchanged, but his donkey had died and all that was left were his bones. After the man came back to life, God returned the donkey to his former state and this miraculous story of divine intervention remained a beacon for generations. In Christianity, the donkey appears in the journey of the Holy Family-- Mary, Jesus and Joseph—an iconic image that adorns churches all over the world. These stories have infused the humble donkey with exceptional holiness for both Muslims and Christians.

Within the psychological framework of dream analysis, the famous psychotherapist Carl Jung believed that the donkey appearing in one's dream was a sign of death if it coincided with a celebratory season. Archaeological discoveries estimate the donkey to have been in existence for about twelve thousand years, originally descending from a type of horse that first emerged in the area of Somalia. Somali donkeys are considered to be among the best breed of donkey. This type reproduces throughout the year after a gestational period of eleven months. The donkey then reaches full maturity at four years. Donkeys are both domesticated and wild, and vary in their breeds. Some in the medical community believe that donkey's skin has aphrodisiac qualities. Several charities exist to care for and preserve the donkey.

The donkey has occupied a prominent position in the arts, surpassing that of other animals.

We see the donkey appear in one of Ahmad Shawky's poems: A donkey fell from the ship in darkness, and his comrades wept for his loss and prayed for mercy. When dawn broke, a wave approached the ship. The wave said "Take this donkey as he came to me unharmed. I could not swallow him because he could be not digested."

The donkey appears in the book "Platero and I" by the great Spanish poet and author, Juan Ramon Jimenez. The donkey also appears in the collection of philosophical essays by the Egyptian author Tawfiq al-Hakim, "My Donkey Told me" in which he narrates the story of his friendship with his donkey, and how that donkey surpasses humans in friendship and companionship and ease of interaction.

The donkey appears in the both Egyptian and international film, where we can't forget the great song "What's up, my donkey" in the film "Amal" (1952) for which Ma'moun Shenawy wrote the words, and Mahmoud Sherif composed the music. The film was created by Henry Barakat, written by Youssef Issa, and shot by Mustafa Hassan. The donkey has provided rich inspiration for Egyptian artists, among them the pioneer photographer Mahmoud Said in his famous work "Women of the City". Other photographers were also moved by the images of the donkey in rural settings, such as Badawi Saafan and Mustafa Butt. Egyptian sculptors such as Idris Farajallah, Adam Hanein, and Mohamed Rizk became famous for their brilliant donkey creations and statues. The list of Arab and international artists who have found inspiration in the donkey is long.

All of this confirms that the donkey is truly an icon of humanity. I think that the donkey has a special beauty, both internal and external: It has two large, beautiful eyes that carry within them goodness and gentleness; it has two large ears that show its noble ability to listen to both animal and humans; it has four proportionate limbs and a gently curving belly; its tail hangs down as a mark of its decency and humility; it has a unique ability to convey both its joy and sorrow.

As we consider the donkey, we can see that it is one of the most dazzling creatures to have stirred many innovators with its humility, patience, compassion, and generosity—this inspiring keeper of human secrets, an immortal icon of humanity.