

Humanity lost and gained

This is sort of a tangent, but looking at these early chapters of Genesis, I was curious about what it means to be human, and how the Bible defines that. What is the distinctive that separates man from the animals, and from the angels? And can that boundary ever be crossed?

There is a compelling case that resurrection promised to believers lifts us to the realm of angelic life, with moments of transfiguration (Moses, Jesus, Stephen, etc.) reflecting that destiny.

Daniel 12:3 - And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.

(The early rabbis and apocalyptic writers saw becoming like stars referring to becoming like the angels and related that to the shining of Moses' face coming down from Sinai, etc.)

Philippians 2:15 - "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world"

(The rabbis considered Sons of God to be referring to the angelic host. Paul pulls our "angelification" into the here and now, spiritually shining like *phōstēr* or luminaries, which usually referenced the stars or heavenly bodies; displaying our heavenly destiny in the way we live now in this world).

Many scriptures warn us against becoming "brute beasts" by following our base desires.

For instance,

2 Peter 2:12 - But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption.

A parable by Jesus depicts the prodigal son, who wasted his inheritance on riotous living and descends to living like an animal:

Luke 15:16 - And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

But a few stories punctuate these warnings through a miraculous blurring of the lines between man and animal, for our edification.

Balaam's Ass

One is where the ass speaks to the false prophet Balaam - language being one of the defining characteristics of humans.

Numbers 22:28 - "And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?"

Another more striking example is the curse on King Nebuchadnezzar.

See "The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4" by M. H. Henze
<http://buff.ly/2dwaFk6>

Nebuchadnezzar

Nebuchadnezzar not only lost his rulership (like Adam turned out from Eden) but descended fully to an animal nature, even apparently losing his self-consciousness:

Daniel 4:25 - That they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.

A midrash relates that Nebuchadnezzar said: Human beings are not worthy that I should live among them. Instead, I shall make for myself a small cloud and I shall dwell in it!" As it is said, "I shall ascend on the back of a cloud..." - Isaiah 14:14

In response to his pridefulness, God separates him from human beings and he gives him the "heart of an animal."

Nebuchadnezzar, who exiled the Jews from their land, is now exiled from companionship of men.

There was rabbinic controversy over whether the king was self-aware during his time of transformation.

Midrash Daniel (13th cent) - His sense was altered and his reason departed him and he was given the heart of a beast, which has no mind at all. All this [was done] in order that he be able to endure the punishment inflicted upon him; for if his mind and reason had remained intact, he would have gone mad and died. He was given the appearance of a beast and animal in order that he not die, but endure all his sufferings during the seven seasons."

Not like an incidence of lycanthropy, or becoming a werewolf - it only says he was given an animal "heart."

Possibly a psychological affliction?

There is an affliction called boanthropy. This is a rare psychological disorder in which a human being believes herself to be a bovine.

<http://trivialdevotion.blogspot.com/2011/08/madness-of-king-nebuchadnezzar.html>
British scholar R.K. Harrison (1920-1993) provides the following account from physician Raymond Harris on his experiences with a man suffering from boanthropy in a British mental institution in 1946:

A patient was in his early 20's who reportedly had been hospitalized for about five years. His symptoms were well developed on admission, and diagnosis was immediate and conclusive. He was of average height and weight with good physique, and was in excellent bodily health. His mental symptoms included pronounced anti-social tendencies, and because of this he spent the entire day from dawn to dusk outdoors, in the grounds of the institution... His daily routine consisted of wandering around the magnificent lawns with which the otherwise dingy hospital situation was graced, and it was his custom to pluck up and eat handfuls of the grass as he went along. On observation he was seen to discriminate carefully between grass and weeds, and on inquiry from the attendant the writer was told the diet of this patient consisted exclusively of grass from hospital lawns. He never ate institutional food with the other inmates, and his only drink was water... The writer was able to examine him cursorily, and the only physical abnormality noted consisted of a lengthening of the hair and a course, thickened condition of the fingernails." (Harrison, Introduction To the Old Testament, 1116)

Nebuchadnezzar's case displays "a complete regressive degeneration of a man who has overreached himself." (Carl Jung, Analytical Psychology 123)."

Historical references

Berosus, a Babylonian priest and astronomer of the third century BCE, documents that Nebuchadnezzar became suddenly ill after 43 years in power (Contra Apionem 1:20). Eusebius (263-339) cites a report from the Greek historian Abydenus that corroborates the Biblical account stating that in Nebuchadnezzar's latter days he was "possessed by some god or other (Eusebius, Preparatio Evangelica 9:41)." Also, a clay tablet housed in the British Museum known as BM34113 (lines 3,6,7,11,12,14) describes Nebuchadnezzar exhibiting irregular behavior including noting that "his life appeared of no value to him (Kendall K. Down [b. 1949], Daniel: Hostage in Babylon, 30). It has also been argued that an Aramaic fragment excavated from Qumran Cave 4 in 1952 attributed to Babylon's last king, Nabonidus (556-539 BCE), is actually a garbled tradition relaying the illness of Nebuchadnezzar (Archer, Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 7, 63).

Compare Israel making the golden calf:

Psalm 106:19-21 - "They made a calf in Horeb, and worshipped the molten image. Thus they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass. They forgot God their saviour, which had done great things in Egypt"

Repentance and a return of 'reason'

The Rabbis referred to Nebuchadnezzar as “the wicked one” and “hater and adversary of God.”

But God’s intention - even for this evil king - is not to punish but to instruct and transform. Later Greek versions added a full confession by Nebuchadnezzar denoting his repentance.

“At the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven and my reason returned to me.” - Daniel 4:31

“If even the wicked who deserve extermination but look up to heaven, the Holy One, blessed be he - pardons them, how much more and more pardon, therefore, to Israel, children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, if they look up to Heaven!” - Midrash on Psalms, 32, 1.

Tertullian says this story shows that no one is beyond repentance and God’s mercy.

—above from “The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination” by Gary A. Anderson, Notre Dame professor of Old Testament

The lesson for believers

Below: from The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception, Volume 2
<http://buff.ly/2djofsq>

St. Ephrem the Syrian, circa 300 A.D. in *Hymns on Paradise*:

The king of Babylon resembled
Adam, king of the universe:
both rose up against the one Lord
and were brought low;
He made them outlaws,
castinf them afarl
Who can fail to weep,
seeing that these free-born kings
preferred slavery
amd servitude.
Blessed is He who releases us
so that His image might no longer be in bondage.

Ephrem says that because Adam freely chose to rebel,

“He dwelt there with them [i.e. the animals] in the wilderness” He “ate, together with them as a result of the curse, grass and roots, and he died, becoming their peer.”

Similarly, for Nebuchadnezzar, “only when he repented did he return to his former abode and kingship.”

Believers are tested like Adam. This test is not about the fruit of the tree, but about obedience to Christ whose fruit we may enjoy daily

“Now because God had given to Adam everything inside and outside Paradise through Grace, requiring nothing in return, either for his creation or for the glory in which he had clothed him, He nevertheless, out of Justice, held back one tree from him to whom He had given, in Grace, everything in Paradise and on earth, in the air and in the seas. For when God created Adam, He did not make him mortal, nor did He fashion him as immortal; this was so that Adam himself, either through keeping the commandment, or by transgressing it, might acquire from this one of the trees whichever outcome he wanted.

- St. Ephrem, Commentary on Genesis 2:7

Because it was not easy
for us to see our fallen state -
how and whence we had fallen
at the very outset -
He depicted it all together
in that king [Nebuchadnezzar]
portraying in our fall
his fall,
and portraying our return
in his repentant return.
Praise to Him who delineated
this likeness for the repentant.
Although he disliked
the abode of wild beasts
it was necessary
for the king to remain there;
yet despite his madness and error,
he recalled that he was a man
and prayed that he might be returned
to his own former abode;
and when the Good One returned him,
he gave thanks to Him for his compassion.
Blessed is He who gave us in him
an example of returning.

Adam saw the sharp contrast between Paradise and the fallen world. We don't, so God gave the story of Nebuchadnezzar's fate to us as an example.

Part of Nebuchadnezzar's repentance included displaying Messiah-like kingly virtues

Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, by Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/kad/dan004.htm>

Daniel 4:27 - "Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity."

As the king should practice righteousness toward all his subjects, so should he exercise mercy toward the oppressed, the miserable, the poor. Both of these virtues are frequently named together, e.g., Isa 11:4; Psa 72:4; Isa 41:2, as virtues of the Messiah.