If we undertook to house all speaking animals in world literature in an imaginary zoo, we would easily run out of space. The shelter of speaking animals in the Bible, however, would remain almost empty, housing only a serpent and an ass—surprisingly so, regarding the literatures of the Near East and Graeco-Roman antiquity, where speaking animals are routinely employed. We will have more success if we extend our search to the Apocryphal Acts and rabbinical literature, where speaking animals are more frequent.

This chapter will examine the function of speaking and otherwise intelligent or pious animals in a range of Christian texts, with special attention to asses, and discuss their connection to the Balaam narrative. (1) First, I will survey the major Apocryphal Acts for speaking animals. (2) In the second part I will discuss two speaking asses in the Acts of Thomas. (3) In the third section we will make a detour to Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem. (4) In the fourth part, I will deal with the ass in Pseudo-Lucian’s and Apuleius’ narratives. (5) In the fifth part, I will investigate the motif of asses carrying [images of] gods. (6) Finally, I will address some cognitive psychological aspects of speaking animals.

1. Speaking animals in the Apocryphal Acts

Speaking animals are stock-material in the Apocryphal Acts. Since our study concentrates on the occurrence of asses, a few examples
will suffice to illustrate the frequent use of other intelligent animals. In the *Acts of Paul*, the apostle baptises a speaking lion, which he meets again when he is sentenced to the animals in Ephesus.\(^5\) In the *Acts of Peter* 9–12 a dog serves as the apostle’s messenger, summoning Simon Magus. In the *Acts of Thomas*, both speaking animals of the Hebrew Bible are featured: the apostle destroys the serpent of Eden (31–33), and speaking asses, as we will see immediately, appear twice in the narrative (39–41; 68–81). Philip in his Acts meets three articulate animals: the eagle that he takes sight of on a tree turns out to be Jesus Christ himself (*Acts of Philip* 3.5–9);\(^6\) later he baptises a leopard and a kid who will even receive the Eucharist (8 and 12).

2. Speaking asses in the *Acts of Thomas*

Let us now turn our attention to the speaking asses in the *Acts of Thomas*.\(^7\) Right after the apostle defeats the serpent, an ass’s colt walks up to him and invites him, ‘Twin brother of Christ, apostle of the Most High [. . .] mount, sit on me, and rest, until you come to the city’. (39)\(^8\) ‘Who are you,’ inquires the apostle, ‘and to whom you belong? For surprising and strange is that which was spoken by you. These things are also hidden from many’. (40) And the colt answers, ‘I am of that family which served Balaam, and to which also belonged the colt on which sat your Lord and your Master. And now I have been sent to


\(^{8}\) In the Syriac text, Thomas foretells that the colt would speak (see below).