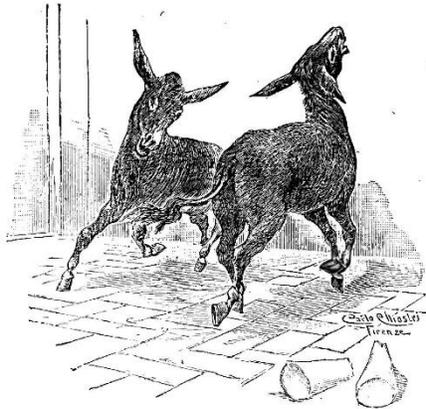


BECOMING LITTLE DONKEYS A Devotional Meditation from

Exodus 10:1-13:16; Numbers 18:1-20; 1 Samuel 1; Isaiah 43:3-4;
Jeremiah 46:13-28; Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:1-9; Luke 2:22-24

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Pinocchio and his friend Lampwick are transformed into donkeys in the Land of Toys. Illustration by Carlo Chiostrì from a 1902 edition of The Adventures of Pinocchio: The Story of a Marionette by Carlo Collodi, [via Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pinocchio_and_Lampwick.jpg).

paraphrase of that observation in the 1940 film version of the story: “Give a bad boy enough rope, and he’ll soon make a jackass of himself.”*

Given their reputation, it is a mystery why donkeys receive favorable attention in the Bible, even receiving special mention in God’s instructions about remembering the Exodus from Egypt. This happens as Moses explains to the Hebrews how to escape the plague of death to the firstborn.

That story is so familiar that we gloss over the full impact. The Redeemer of Israel gave specific instructions how to avoid the plague. All one need do was be inside a structure covered by the blood of the Passover Lamb as the Angel of Death came by. Families who chose to disregard the instructions suffered grievous loss. Someone died that night in every single home in Egypt, leaving countless widows, orphans, and parents bereaved of children. Truly redemption is a painful process, as God said through Isaiah:

For I am *ADONAI* your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I have given Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. Since you are precious in My eyes, honored, because I love you, I will give a man in exchange for you, and other peoples for your life.

Isaiah 43:3-4 TLV

* Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio: The Tale of A Marionette*, (New York: Golden Press, 1966), 96-97; “Pinocchio Quote,” IMDB, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0032910/quotes/>.

The Redeemer gave instructions so His people would always remember the frightful cost of redemption, not only by reenacting the Passover, but by obeying His instructions about redemption of each new generation:

Now when *ADONAI* brings you into the land of the Canaanite, as He swore to you and your fathers and gives it you, you are to set apart to *ADONAI* every firstborn from the womb, and every firstborn male animal you have will be *ADONAI*'s. Every firstborn donkey you are to redeem with a lamb, and if you do not redeem it, then you are to break its neck. But you are to redeem every firstborn male among your sons. So when your son asks you in times to come, "What is this?" say to him, "By a strong hand *ADONAI* brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage, and when Pharaoh refused to let us go, *ADONAI* slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both men and animals. So I sacrifice to *ADONAI* all firstborn males, but I redeem the firstborn of my sons." So it will be like a sign on your hand and like frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand *ADONAI* brought us out of Egypt.

Exodus 13:11-16 TLV

If Egypt's firstborn were the price of Israel's redemption, then Israel's firstborn would bear the cost in service to the Lord. Later, the Lord accepted the tribe of Levi as a substitute for the firstborn males, reiterating the lesson that His redemption is all about substitutes. Ultimately His own Firstborn would lay down His life as a substitute for the entire world.

This is another thing we gloss over because we have heard it so much. It helps to meditate on the reason our Redeemer required our Hebrew ancestors to pay the price of their own firstborn, both of humans and of animals. They had to learn something about the cost involved, and the obligation they had undertaken by accepting God's offer of redemption. That is the same lesson we must learn.

It is peculiar that the only beasts mentioned in the instructions about redemption are donkeys and lambs. In God's further instructions on the matter in Numbers 18, He says clean animals are not redeemable because they become candidates for sacrificial offerings and portions for the priests and Levites. He commands Israel to redeem other unclean domestic animals, but in Exodus He specifies an option for a donkey: either redeem it, or kill it. It is a dubious distinction, so we must ask why it is there, and why it appears in the context of redemption of firstborn sons. Is there some connection between donkeys and humans we should know about?

Consider for a moment what this transaction entails. The firstborn, whether human or animal, belongs to the Lord for special service to Him. That's why Israel's Redeemer permitted the substitution of the Levites, but specified that parents should pay a set amount to redeem their firstborn sons – a price which Luke tells us Joseph and Mary paid for Yeshua, their firstborn:

And when the days of their purification were fulfilled, according to the *Torah* of Moses, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present to *ADONAI*. As it is written in the *Torah* of *ADONAI*, "Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to *ADONAI*." So they offered a sacrifice according to what was said in the *Torah* of *ADONAI*: "a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons."

Luke 2:22-24 TLV

From the very beginning, Yeshua's life was all about redemption, but before He could redeem the world, His own commandments required that He Himself be redeemed.

But what of the donkeys? Why are the instructions about redemption so specific about them? One Jewish tradition says it's because every family that left Egypt had several donkeys laden with the gold and jewels they had been given by the Egyptians. That explanation takes on another layer of meaning when we realize that a donkey carried our Messiah into the Holy City on the final stage of His journey of redemption for humanity.

Then again, it may be that God is calling our attention to the characteristics we humans share with donkeys. We, like they, are often stubborn and obnoxious. A person who acts like a donkey is banned from polite society. Such people can't seem to help themselves. They act that way because they know no better and have no desire to learn.

And here is the paradox: The firstborn of the donkey belongs to the Lord because He expended blood to purchase it, but it is an unclean beast and thus unacceptable for His service. Yet since it can be useful elsewhere, the Redeemer provides another substitute: a perfect lamb. When the exchange is made, the family that owns the donkey may retain it for their service for its entire life, and the beast fulfills its God-ordained purpose.

Of course, if the donkey's owner is mean-spirited enough, he may deny the Lord His portion by refusing the lamb. In doing so, he not only denies himself the use of the donkey, but he also deprives the donkey of life. Either way, an innocent life ends without mercy. The taking of one life heralds the beginning of another even as it warms the heart of the Creator and meets real needs as the portion given to the Lord's special servants. The taking of the other life is senseless slaughter, inflicted needlessly by one who clings viciously to the little he thinks he may call his own, magnifying his worth in his own eyes by denying the worth of one who cannot speak or act in its own defense. Truly he is a murderer, seeking only to steal, kill, and destroy.

This is where we see that the donkey is not a representation of a human; it is the human. The stubborn, stiff-necked beast is yet precious to the Lord, but it cannot come near on its own. Not only is it unclean, it is owned by a vicious master who seeks only to slay it. If the Lamb does not redeem it, the only thing left for it is death. And then the transaction happens. He redeemed our fathers from Egypt, and He redeemed us from sin. In time He will complete His work by an astounding transformation that will make us forever acceptable in His sight.