

The canine conundrum: a linguistic and cultural analysis of “dog” in biblical texts

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Received: 24 January 2025; **Accepted:** 23 February 2025; **Published:** 25 March 2025

Abstract: The Bible features a wide array of animals, each of carrying symbolic or practical significance. The book mentions numerous animals, from domestic livestock like sheep and goats to wild creatures like lions and eagles, and even insects and reptiles. The role of dogs in Christianity, as reflected in the Bible and Christian tradition, presents a complex picture. Often “dogs” are associated with scavenging, uncleanness, and even used as a derogatory term. However, there are also instances where dogs are depicted fulfilling practical roles. This article discusses the roles of dogs in holy book.

Keywords: A dog, Greco-Roman times, Christianity, the Bible, Saint Roch, Saint Guinefort.

Introduction: Dogs play an important role in the religions, myths, fairy tales, and legends of many cultures. In mythology, dogs often served as pets or guardians. (18)

In Christianity, dogs represent loyalty. In Christian folklore, church guardian spirits often take the form of black dogs to protect Christian churches and their courtyards. (4)

The Roman Catholic Church recognizes Saint Roch (also known as Saint Rocco), who lived in France in the early 14th century, as the patron saint of dogs. It is said that while engaged in charitable works, he contracted the plague and went into the forest to await his death. There, he befriended a dog that licked his wounds and brought him food, and he recovered. The feast of Saint Roch, August 16, is celebrated in Bolivia as the “birthday of all dogs.” (20)

Saint Guinefort is the name given to a dog that was locally venerated as a saint in a French shrine from the 13th to the 20th centuries. (16)

The black and white dog is sometimes used as an unofficial symbol of monks, religious sisters, and nuns in the Dominican Order.

In the Bible’s book of Genesis, we see that God gave humans dominion over the animal kingdom. (7) In fact, the first man, Adam, was given the task of naming the animals in the garden. The story of Noah shows that today, not only beloved pets but also all kinds of

animals should be cared for. The book also states that it is not permissible to cut off a living animal’s limb. (8) The book of Exodus reminds us that animals, especially those who work on the land, should be treated with respect and care. When it comes to the laws on the Sabbath, not only are humans commanded to rest and not do any work, but animals are also exempt from work. “Six days you shall do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord (a day of rest in some religions). You shall not do any work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your male servant, nor your cattle, nor your alien resident who is with you.” (5) The book of Proverbs says: “The righteous man knows the needs of his animal, but the wicked man’s response is cruelty.” (12)

Throughout the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean, domestic dogs served as companions, hunters, herding dogs, and guard dogs. The Bible mentions dogs in similar roles (e.g., Job 30:1; Isaiah 56:10–11). Although dogs are sometimes used in negative contexts in the Bible, such as in insults, they are not included in the list of religiously “impure” animals. Strong argues that at least until the 2nd century BCE, the Jews had a positive attitude toward dogs.

If dogs were considered unclean by the Israelites, this notion was abandoned by the 2nd century BC, when the Book of Tobit was written. The author, in telling the story of Tobias setting out on a long journey, describes

his dog leaving the Jewish home, perhaps accompanied by the angel Raphael, as a companion and guardian on the journey. (19)

In Greco-Roman times, dogs were commonly seen sitting under tables, eating scraps of food that fell to the ground. In the 6th century BC, Eurythius Krater is depicted with dogs under the table. Also in the New Testament, a Syro-Phoenician woman speaks of dogs under the table: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat what falls from their masters' table." (11)

A Roman tombstone depicting a Maltese dog in biblical times, the tomb of a dog named Helena, dates back to the 2nd century BC. The tombstone reads: "To Helena, foster child, incomparable and praiseworthy soul."

Some ancient Greeks and Romans buried their deceased pets in tombs and erected tombstones. This shows that the owners cared for their pets. Several records even describe dogs as family members.

Dogs also played the role of healers in the Greco-Roman world. Strong explains how this came about: ancient authors noted, for example, that dogs knew how to lift a wounded leg, following the teachings of Hippocrates. Ancient observers noted, among other things, that dogs knew what plants to eat as a remedy to induce vomiting if they had eaten something that upset their stomach, how to remove foreign bodies, such as thorns, and how to lick their wounds to clean them, realizing that clean wounds heal faster.

As the healers of the animal kingdom, dogs were worshipped in a manner similar to the Greek god of medicine, Asclepius. Sacred dogs living in the temples of the god would lick the wounds of those who came to the temple. Their tongues would soothe the wounds and bring about healing.

Justin David Strong examines the biblical dog and the ancient world in his article "From Pets to Physicians: Dogs in the Biblical World," published in the May/June 2019 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. He shows how archaeological discoveries shed light on the various roles dogs played in the Bible. In particular, understanding the attitude toward dogs in the Greco-Roman period can be illustrated by the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31.

In the New Testament, the term "dog" is used to refer to those who are excluded from Paradise because of their false teachings, impurity, or greed. "Outside Paradise are dogs (homosexuals, lesbians, prostitutes), sorcerers, adulterers, murderers, idolaters, and those who love and practice lies." (15)

"You shall not bring the wages of a prostitute or a dog (a sodomite, homosexual man) into the house of the Lord your God for any vow, for both of these are an

abomination to the Lord your God." (3)

The book of Ezekiel says that the princes (leaders) of Jerusalem are like wild dogs tearing prey to shed blood and kill. (6)

It is also said that there are four different destructive plagues for the inhabitants of Jerusalem because they turned away from God and turned to evil: the sword to kill, dogs to tear to pieces, birds of the air to devour and destroy, and beasts of the earth to devour. (9)

David's old friend Saul becomes his enemy out of jealousy and begins sending men to kill him. This is described in the book of Psalms: "They return at evening: they go about the city, making a noise like a dog." (14) A similar meaning is given in Psalm 59:14.

The Bible also tells the story of Naboth, a Jezreelite man who owned a vineyard near his palace. Her husband Ahab was murdered by Queen Jezebel of Israel for taking possession of his vineyard. Elijah tells King Ahab about this: "Thus says the Lord: Have you not killed a man and taken possession of his property? In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood." (1)

The fate of King Ahab is recorded in the book of 1 Kings, where he is seriously wounded in battle and dies on his way back to Samaria. This is described in 1 Kings 22:38 as follows: "They washed the chariot in the pool of Samaria, where the prostitutes bathed, and the dogs licked up his (Ahab's) blood, which had flowed into the chariot. It was just as my lord had said."

In Bible times, being eaten by dogs was considered a shameful death. There could be nothing worse than having a human body eaten by dogs. This is mentioned in 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:19,23 and several other verses of the book. This fate also befell the wicked pagan queen of Israel, Jezebel, who had caused much suffering to the prophets. The Bible also says of Jezebel: "The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel." (2) The Bible says that Queen Jezebel was thrown out of a window by her enemies and that her body was indeed eaten by dogs when they went to bury her. There are also passages with a similar meaning in 2 Kings 9:10, 2 Kings 9:35-36.

Jesus once said, "Do not give what is holy to dogs; do not throw your pearls before swine." (10) This was a metaphor for not wasting time reasoning with people who lack spiritual understanding.

The Bible foretells the crucifixion of Jesus with these words: "Dogs surround me, a band of wicked people surround me; they pierce my hands and my feet." (13)

According to the Bible, where there are domestic dogs, there is idolatry, wickedness, and sin. For this reason, many people believe that dogs and idolatry go hand in

hand. For example, in ancient Egypt, domestic dogs were kept and various dogs were worshipped as "gods." As a result, the people were severely punished for their idolatry. The ten plagues that occurred during the time of Moses were a judgment on Egypt.

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