
What can a pastor learn from a donkey?¹

by Jacob Finifrock

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In January 2002, six Wycliffe members were invited to work among the Tharaka people of central Kenya. Our task was to help promote the use of the newly translated New Testament, a cooperative project between Bible Translation & Literacy (BTL) in Kenya, The Seed Company, and the Tharaka translation team. The New Testament had just come to completion in August 2001. As a team, we were mostly green recruits on our first assignment. Our task, along with the Tharaka translation team, was to assess the current use of the New Testament and develop and implement strategies designed to enhance its use.

There is very little irrigation in the region and most Tharaka need to trek to one of the several permanent rivers, or foreign-drilled bore holes, to obtain water for domestic use. Within the last 30 years donkeys have been introduced by neighboring tribes, primarily to haul grain to market or water to the home. They were assimilated into the herds of goats, cows and sheep that, in Tharaka custom, are driven from behind the animals. Casey Wade, an accomplished Texan horse-trainer, who just so happened to be one of our team members, began to notice that the Tharaka have a hate-hate relationship with their donkeys. The donkeys hate their owners who in turn hate their donkeys. They are left with no other alternative, though, and must use the beasts to haul their grain and water long distances.

We listened to story after story of donkeys abusing their owners. One man's donkey would refuse to return home with his water, and another kicked a cyclist off of a bridge to his death. By the time we arrived in Tharaka there was a long history of fear, dread, abuse, and hatred of these animals. Adjectives such as "vicious," "wild," "aggressive," and "dangerous" were most often used to describe them. To simply call a donkey stubborn was quite a compliment!

As Casey and I talked with our Tharaka friends who owned donkeys, we began to see some parallels between human–donkey relationships and leader–follower relationships among people in the community, churches, and families.

Casey had identified several factors that were causing the donkeys in Tharaka to fear and abuse their owners. Understanding how the animals develop and how they relate to other donkeys shed some light on the issues at hand.

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The first is that donkeys are forced to haul loads before two years of age when their knee joints have not fully developed. This causes great pain in older donkeys that are expected to carry loads. A second factor is that donkeys must be led from the front, not driven from behind. A donkey will follow a leader out of trust when led, but the only way to drive them from behind is to frighten them using a cane. As a donkey ages the cane must be applied with more force in order for it to respond to the desires of the owner. Soon the donkey associates the human sounds and smells with pain and instinctively stays alert, ready to defend itself at the slightest stimulus.

Thus, the two main methods Tharaka people use to control the donkeys—force and fear—are the same two factors that cause the animals to be aggressive towards their owners and to eventually become useless.

Reading through Scripture has led me to form the opinion that Satan exercises his authority by using the same two tactics: fear and force. The two methods are inextricably intertwined. I do not propose to make an argument for exactly how he uses them in this paper; I propose them more for thought because they relate to the human realm and, I believe, explain to some degree the manner in which humans often exercise authority.

I have observed that humans by nature generally replicate what has been modeled to them. Therefore, those who have been for so many years under Satan's authority will exercise their authority over a donkey, a family, or a church in the same manner it has been modeled to them by Satan. This is exactly what we found to be true in Tharaka. Even those who have become Christians in the last forty years tend to follow the cultural patterns of authority used by non-believers. It is only through a process of careful discipleship and a clear understanding of Scriptural teachings that these destructive patterns can be unlearned and replaced with the life-giving patterns taught and modeled by Christ.

Romans 8:19–21 (NIV) says, *“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”*

Casey began to teach Njeru, a local man, the techniques of donkey training. At each step he would teach Njeru a truth about donkeys or a training technique and then relate a Scripture that reinforced why he did something a certain way. His whole purpose was to liberate both the animal and the person from the bondage of fear and frustration that was causing so many problems. Many of his techniques are as counterintuitive and contrary to human nature as are Jesus' teachings to walk an extra mile for a Roman soldier or to show love to an enemy.



Over meals we would discuss the issues we were seeing in the churches or the questions that the pastors were asking during our seminars. Many pastors would express frustration that their members were not giving of their time or resources, or that there was strife and backbiting within the congregation. Others would tell their congregations what to do, and

chastise them if they did not do it, but there were very few who would lead by example. Pastors tended to be quite harsh and authoritative with their members. We began to see correlations between church issues and donkey issues. It dawned on us that *“the whole creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”* Many of the issues that pastors faced were so similar to the issues of donkey owners that it was striking. So, with some creativity and some guts, Casey proposed that he teach biblical principles of leadership through a live donkey training demonstration. As it turns out, we stumbled upon a unique and arguably most effective Scripture Use tool.

When organizing a seminar we would request the organizing pastor to find an untrained donkey whose owner would allow us to use it for a morning. On one occasion the man came the morning of the lesson without the donkey he had promised could be used. When the organizing pastor asked where the animal was, the man replied that he had left it tied in the market. He said that his donkey was too vicious. He was sure that his animal would kill Casey and that the police would hold him accountable for his death. Ultimately he consented and was quite pleased to have a trained animal at the end of the day!

The whole process is done without using any force, aggression, or painful contact with the donkey. The idea is to give the donkey choices and reward the animal when it makes a choice that honors the trainer’s authority. By doing this in a systematic way, the animal learns to cooperate with the trainer and to understand his signals, body language, and verbal commands without fearing the trainer’s movements or his physical contact. The first step is to establish respect by having the donkey stand and face the trainer, usually accomplished within thirty minutes. Then, the donkey allows the trainer to gently touch the head and mane, and a halter is placed on its head. With the trainer’s calm persistence the donkey will allow more and more touch, and by the end of the first hour of training the “vicious,” “abusive” animal will allow itself to be touched over its entire body, including its legs and hooves. It is now time to teach the animal to willingly follow the trainer, which involves patient instruction of one step, then two, and eventually the donkey follows without any tension placed on the rope, following the trainer whom it is now beginning to trust.

By this stage, the pastors are in disbelief, clicking their tongues and shaking their heads while they watch. They marvel and laugh at the simplicity and effectiveness of the training. Usually by this time a larger crowd of community members and schoolchildren has gathered to see this unusual event, and the grand finale rarely disappoints. The final step, mounting the animal, usually takes another twenty minutes of gentle instruction. All in all, in less than three hours the donkey has gone from being frightened and defensive to being comfortable and even affectionate with its trainer. The goals set forth in the beginning have been met.

As Casey would do his training he was careful to explain why he was doing what he was doing from a technical standpoint, but the most significant lessons we wanted to communicate were spiritual in nature. Donkey training was just a forum for modeling more significant truths and exposing pastors to mother-tongue Scriptures. Casey thoughtfully outlined several important Scripture passages and worked the applications into the training.

Many of these scriptural truths had shaped Casey's approach to his profession and were displayed artistically in the frame of this living lesson.

- Genesis 1:24–26. God created all animals, including donkeys and pronounced that they were good!
- Genesis 1:28, Psalm 8:6–8. He also gave man authority to rule over them.
- Genesis 3:14ff. Creation came under a curse because of man's disobedience to God and relationships became corrupted.
- Genesis 9:2. Animals have a natural fear and dread of man that must be overcome in order for us to work with them. There is a predator–prey relationship that the donkey understands.
- Numbers 22:21–33. This is the account of Balaam that shows the intelligence of a donkey and God's merciful attitude towards animals. Note the angel of the Lord's apparent displeasure at Balaam for his mistreatment of his animal by asking Balaam why he beat his donkey.
- Proverbs 12:10. A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal.
- Galatians 5:22–23. The fruits of the Spirit are marks of the life of the Spirit in us. Even animals pick up on these characteristics in us and respond positively to them. The natural fear of the animal is overcome by our practice of love, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness, and self-control.
- 2 Corinthians 5:17–18, Romans 8:19–21, Ephesians 1:10. We as believers are ministers of reconciliation, reconciling both man and creation (all things under heaven, including our animals) to right relationship with God under Christ's headship through the chain of authority established by God.
- Isaiah 65:25. When God's authority is once again firmly established, there will be peace between all creatures.

"I realized today that I have really mistreated my animals. Tomorrow when I go home [after the seminar is over] I will apologize to my donkey. Then on Saturday I will let both my wife and my donkey rest while I go to the river by myself to fetch water. I owe them at least that." — Community leader responding to the question, "What have you learned?"

"I have seen a vicious animal become friendly. Now I know that there is no woman who is too difficult to live with. If husbands treated our wives properly we would not have so many problems with them." — Pastor responding to the question "what have you learned?"

The living model of the transformation of a donkey, along with the use and application of Scripture left a profound impact on all of us who were involved in these lessons. We were exposed to the magnificent order and unity in God's creation and were reminded that the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof!

The pastors and lay leaders adeptly made applications to their churches, marriages, parenting, and home responsibilities. Often the lessons learned were much more profound than the ones we set out to teach, and we were excited to see these lessons having a broad scope of influence.

The list of lessons learned as expressed to me by many of the pastors would be quite extensive, and surely I was unable to record them all. Some of the frequent responses follow:

1. God is the Creator of everything.
2. God has given us authority to us over all creatures, including donkeys.
3. Animals, like men, have been corrupted by the fall.
4. The way we treat our animals or our families can be a testimony to our neighbors.
5. We are to exercise our authority over our subjects like God exercises his authority over us in an effort to reconcile man and creation to God.
6. By treating our subjects with love and respect we gain their trust. By forcing them or frightening them we make them mistrust us.
7. It is important for church leaders to lead by example instead of driving our members from behind.
8. When our subjects trust us they will follow willingly if they are carefully taught in a way they can understand.
9. It is important to use the mother tongue in our churches. The donkey understood the way the trainer communicated with it because he used the same "language" a donkey would.
10. By living out the fruit of the Spirit, we are imitating Christ and are able to have a positive effect on even a wild, vicious, dangerous donkey. How much more on the intelligent people in our churches or families.

The converging factors in the Tharaka community and church, combined with the skill set of our team, provided a marvelous forum for God to manifest himself to us all. I think our entire team, along with our Tharaka colleagues and many Tharaka pastors, are grateful for the life lessons the Lord taught us through his Scriptures, his servant, and a handful of vicious donkeys.

I have included some Scriptures that lend credence to my thoughts. This is by no means a systematic proof for my opinion, but rather food for thought. The themes are primarily slavery

(thus implying Satan or his demons being the forceful master) and fear or intimidation. 1 Peter 5:8, Rom 8:15, 1 John 4:18, Gal 4:9–10, Titus 3:3, Rom 8:19–21, Eph 2:1–3.

It is my opinion that the donkey is innately aware of his position under man's authority and actually desires to be useful. When it recognizes God's pattern of authority, it submits willingly and works diligently to be useful.