

# A Donkey's Tale



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its light showed him so clearly this love that had been missing from his life.

The next thing he knew he was awake, the stable was full of sunlight, and his family was preparing to leave. As they led him out of the stable, he found that he no longer resented the weight of the woman and baby and baggage, and trod more carefully now so that their ride wasn't bumpy. He waited patiently while the man spent a long time with the Roman officials - he didn't know what it was all about, but his only concern was to be of service to him and his wife and child, even if it meant waiting a long time in the sun.

When they at last got back to Nazareth, Ben was given a couple of days off, simply to eat and rest. When he thought about it, this wasn't the first time any of his masters had shown him this kindness. It's just that he had never appreciated it before. He had simply grumbled about how tired he felt, or how he had been worked too hard, or how his work interfered with his concentrating on his astronomical theories.

A couple of days later, when he joined the other donkeys around the water trough, he remembered the other animals in the stable gathered around the manger, and saw them in a completely different light. They were now his friends. He told them about his journey and the new born baby, and even apologised to Tobias, because now he could see that a star was more than just a thing in the sky. It also pointed to the love deep within all things - something that Tobias in his humility had seen, but Benjamin in his arrogance had not.

So while Benjamin never gave up his love of astronomy, he found it much more satisfying, now that he could see the love that set each sun and planet and distant star moving in the sky.

And he even grew to like being called Ben.

Most people think that donkey's are a bit thick, but that's not the way it is. When donkeys seem to be dozing, they are actually thinking about all sorts of things. In fact, most donkeys are experts in one academic field or another, and this is the story of one of them. His name was Benjamin, or Ben for short. He much preferred 'Benjamin', because it made him feel special and dignified, but all the other donkeys preferred to call him Ben, which dented his pride a little. And as we shall see, Ben was a proud animal.

Ben's field of knowledge was astronomy. He knew the phases of the moon and he could name all the constellations. He knew what caused eclipses of the sun, and was very scornful of humans who were afraid of them. As I said, he was a proud donkey, and felt himself to be far superior to these humans who owned him (and, if the truth be told, to other donkeys). He resented having to serve as a beast of burden, and made his resentment known. He would get very cross with humans who talked about things like the sun revolving around the earth (even very silly donkeys knew that it was the other way round!) and would impatiently stamp on the foot of the human who said it, or buck just before the load of vegetables or whatever was secured, and send it flying. As a result, he never stayed long with any owner - he would be sold to someone else, who would sometimes beat him.

Eventually he found himself with a kind man, a carpenter. 'At least this one doesn't think the rings of saturn are celestial doughnuts.' thought Ben, as he carried wood from the merchants. In fact, as he watched the carpenter work from his stall at the end of the workshop, he grudgingly had to admit that this human was clever in his own way, working skilfully with his hands to shape the wood into furniture or farm implements.

One night, as he scanned the skies from his stable window, he noticed a new bright star that seemed to move slowly across the sky each night. He thought that it was a comet, one that appeared every hundred years or more, and the next time he gathered with the

other donkeys around the town water trough, he told them about his theory. Tobias, whose particular interest was astrology became excited and said, "That foretells the birth of a new king, one sent to save his people!" Benjamin snorted in derision. "Superstitious poppycock!" he said. "It's a comet, and that's all." Tobias went quiet and said nothing more.

So you see, Ben was very clever, but not very wise, and not very kind.

Not long after he came to the carpenter, and Ben had seen the comet in the sky, the carpenter and his wife, who was expecting a baby, had to travel south to a little town to be counted in something called a census. It had something to do with the Roman rulers, and since politics did not interest Ben at all, he took no notice of what the other donkeys had told him about it. But he soon found himself on the road out of Nazareth, carrying a heavily pregnant human, plus the family's baggage.

He was not impressed. It meant fourteen days of hard travel, wondering if they would get there before the baby arrived. The only good thing going for him was the opportunity to see the new star clearly in the night sky when they were out in the open. Also he was intrigued to see that it seemed to move in front of them, as if it was leading them. But he was sure there was some explanation for it, and if he thought very hard about it, he was sure he would work out the answer. Meanwhile he plodded along, complaining and muttering under his breath every step of the way.

As I said, service to others was certainly not Ben's style.

Finally they came to Bethlehem, and he heaved a sigh of relief. But there was no relief, at least not for a while. They went from inn to inn, trying to find accommodation, but they were all full. Just when Ben was ready to bray and kick and buck, they found shelter in a stable behind an inn, and settled there for the night.

And just in time, for soon after they arrived, the woman began to go into labour, and soon after that, a little boy was born. His father hastily made a bed of straw in the manger there for the baby to sleep in.

When Ben was finally in his stall, all he wanted to do was sleep, but there seemed to be a constant procession of animals coming to the stable, and the ones already there seemed to talk a lot, so all he could do was doze a bit and become more and more angry with all the noise. After all, he was a learned animal, and had made some important calculations in the morning, so he needed his sleep. Couldn't they see that?! The only animal who seemed to understand was the cow in the next stall, whose gentle lowing soothed him.

Then as he dozed, he dreamed (or was it a dream?) that as the soft glow of that new star shone through the window it fell onto the manger and the sleeping baby. As he watched, other humans came to kneel before him - rough shepherds and regal kings, all worshipping this child. Then one by one the animals left their stalls and gathered around the manger and gazed in silence at the baby, and for once the stable became hushed. Ben simply had to see what they were seeing, so he left his stall and stood with them. As he gazed at the sleeping baby, he began to feel an unfamiliar feeling. It was a feeling of wonder and love. He wanted to stay here with all the other animals. He didn't want to be superior any more, or treat them, or humans, as silly or foolish. Somehow this tiny human child had crept into his heart and showed him what he could be - a noble and wise donkey, able to accept the love of others, and love them in return.

When Ben eventually returned to his stall, for the first time in his life he thought deeply about something other than astronomy. He thought about his pride and arrogance and about how he had treated his friends. He thought about the new star, and what Tobias had said, and how he had been so nasty to him. He thought about how the star really did foretell the birth of a special child, and how