

# What We Can Learn from Monkeys

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## Scriptures: 2 Chronicles 9

*1 When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon, she came to Jerusalem to test him with hard questions, having a very great retinue and camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones. When she came to Solomon, she discussed with him all that was on her mind...*

*3 When the queen of Sheba had observed the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, 4 the food of his table... and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord... she said to the king, "The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom... 7 Happy are your people! Happy are these your servants, who continually attend you and hear your wisdom!*

*21 For the king's ships went to Tarshish with the servants of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, monkeys, and peacocks.*

*22 Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. 23 All the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. 24 Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year... 26 He ruled over all the kings from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, and to the border of Egypt.*

## Sermon

Just a quick side note, before I start talking about monkeys. I've always been a fan of the stories we find in our Old Testament. The Queen of Sheba ruled over what is now modern day Ethiopia and according to tradition, as a consequence of this visit, she is credited with bringing Judaism to Ethiopia. Tradition also holds that an additional consequence of her visit was the birth of a male child who became a Hebrew King of Ethiopia. We are told in this chapter that she came to Jerusalem because of her curiosity regarding the spreading fame of young King Solomon.

However, the details, which I spared you this morning, of all that she brought with her might lead one to conclude that more was going on, like some form of strategic alliance between the two Kingdoms. Considering that Egypt was always the biggest bully on the block in that part of the world, an alliance between one small kingdom to the north and another one on Egypt's southern border just might be able to keep the big bully in check.

Solomon had inherited his kingdom from his father David who was a warrior king who had spent most of his career militarily subduing and consolidating Israel's first and only real empire. While David had spent much of his life at war, Solomon's reign was peaceful and prosperous, and devoid of any wars.

So what does this passage have to do with monkeys and my topic this morning? Well very little, if any, actually. This passage and another one in I Kings, chapter 10 which is an odd repetition of the same story, are the only places in the Bible that mention monkeys or apes.

Evolutionary theory claims that we humans descended from apes. As the theory goes, our branch of the evolutionary tree continued to evolve and advance while their sides advance slowed. But I have to wonder at times, when I look around at our behavior as humans, "Have we really evolved that much?" Maybe there are there still things that we can learn from our distant evolutionary cousins, those monkeys?"

This struck me as I read a recent article about the Rhesus Macaques (pronounced Mah-kaaks) of Cayo Santiago, a small island off the southern coast of Puerto Rico. The Rhesus Macaques are not native to this island but were introduced to Cayo Santiago in 1938 by researchers. They are also notorious for being some of the most quarrelsome primates on the planet, with a strict social hierarchy maintained through aggression and competition. But in September 2017, Hurricane Maria, a deadly Category 5 hurricane, devastated the northeastern Caribbean causing over 3,000 deaths in Puerto Rico alone. It was the deadliest and costliest hurricane to ever strike Puerto Rico, as well as the country of Dominica and the U.S. Virgin Islands. And of course, hurricane Maria caused widespread devastation not only for people but for wildlife as well.

Overnight Maria transformed what was a lush jungle oasis on Cayo Santiago into a desert-like spit of sand with mostly skeletal trees. This of course posed a big problem for the island's typically competitively hierarchical residents. Since the researchers fed the monkeys, competition for food wasn't an issue but they still depended upon shade to keep cool in the tropical heat. By wiping out the trees, the storm had left shade in a very short supply.

So, it would follow that a simian battle Royale would soon break out over the island's few remaining patches of shade. Yet that's not what happened. Instead, the macaques did something seemingly inexplicable: They started getting along with each other. "This was really not what we expected," said Camille Testard, a behavioral ecologist and neuroscientist at Harvard University. "Instead of becoming more competitive, individuals widened their social network and became less aggressive."

A paper by Dr. Testard and her colleagues, published last month in the journal Science, offered an explanation for this unexpected surprise. Monkeys who learned to share shade after the storm, they found, had a better chance of survival than those that retained their more inherent aggressive and bickering behaviors.

Since daytime temperatures on Cayo Santiago often soar above 100 degrees, this can be deadly for monkeys stranded in the sun. Following the apocalyptic hurricane researchers expected that the monkeys might invest more in building close alliances so they could join forces to secure shade. But the "complete opposite" happened. The monkeys instead invested in looser partnerships with a larger number of animals and actually became more tolerant of each other overall. Dr. Testard said she suspected that this was because fighting is an energy-intensive activity that generates more body heat

and thus poses more danger to the individual monkeys than “just caring less if another monkey is next to me or not.” Bottom line, it was just too damn hot to fight!

During the most sweltering hours of the afternoon, the researchers observed the macaques crowded together in thin strips of shade. But even when temperatures were less stifling, the monkeys still gathered in larger groups compared with their habits before the storm. Not all the monkeys jumped on the peace train, but those who continued to be aggressive were more likely to pay a steep price. Those monkeys who shared shade experienced a 42 percent decrease in mortality because they were less likely to suffer from heat stress. Dr. Testard said, “Who dies and for what reason is what has changed.” Another behavioral ecologist, said that the “fascinating” findings were “a wonderful example of how being more social can buffer negative effects of environmental change.”

But this is not new since scientists have documented numerous cases of various species responding to environmental pressure with physiological or morphological adaptations. What is new about this study is the suggestion that animals can also respond with persistent changes to their social behavior.

Whether other animals can also respond to environmental upheaval by adjusting their social norms Dr Testard warns, “is going to be very species- and context-dependent.” And whether we human animals have truly evolved enough to make the necessary social changes is also still highly questionable. On the one hand, we do often band together, for example, after natural and human-caused disasters to help one another. But we also know that humans can be quite selfish and very quarrelsome with our limited amounts of shade sometimes!

The importance of behavioral plasticity in helping us and all of creation to survive when our habitat is upended, is extremely important in light of climate change. So yes, we can, and I think we certainly need to learn some things from our distant evolutionary cousins, the monkeys. And just maybe, that’s why Solomon was so smart, since every three years the Queen of Sheba made sure to include some monkeys along with all that gold, silver, ivory, and peacocks she shipped him. Maybe he spent some time, observing and learning from those monkeys. Maybe it was those monkeys who helped to enlighten him so much?