

# Job & Tittle

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## **What was Job's Behemoth?**

by Dana L. Goodnough

Everyone remembers the story of Job, the man who faithfully served God and who, because of Satan's challenge, lost his wealth and family. Job never denied God through this grueling test, but he did question God. The closing chapters of the book of Job record God's majestic reply to Job's cry of despair. God reminds Job that He is an awesome Creator and is, therefore, trustworthy with His creation. As a case in point, God refers to twelve specific animals among His creation—the lion, the raven, the mountain goat, the deer, the wild donkey, the wild ox, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk, the eagle, the behemoth, and the leviathan—that highlight His power and glory as Creator. It is the identity of the behemoth, described in Job 41:15-24, that is the subject of this article. What exactly was Job's behemoth, and why did God include it as one of the most outstanding examples of His creative power?

### ***Proposed Identifications of Behemoth***

The word "behemoth" has, in English, come to mean an unusually large animal of any kind. The term itself is simply the transliteration of a Hebrew word which, in its root form, is the common word for cattle. For example, Genesis 1:24-25 describes God's creation of "livestock" on the sixth day of creation. The word "livestock" comes from the same Hebrew root as "behemoth."

But in Job 40:15-24, God seems to have in mind a specific animal, not just livestock in general. Is it possible to identify more precisely what this animal was? Interpretations of "behemoth" in Job 40:15 include the hippopotamus,<sup>1</sup> the elephant,<sup>2</sup> the water buffalo,<sup>3</sup> and even the dinosaur.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Was Behemoth a Dinosaur?***

Efforts on the part of some creationists to identify Job's behemoth with one of the larger types of dinosaurs seem to stem from a desire to counter evolutionary thinking. Evolutionary theory indicates that many animal species died out long before man appeared on the scene. Some creationists, however, seek to discount this concept by attempting to prove that man and dinosaurs coexisted. If man and dinosaurs lived at the same time, the theory of evolution becomes suspect. Since there is currently no physical or fossil evidence that man and dinosaurs lived at the same time, some creationists have attempted to prove a connection through literary sources. For example, they would view medieval accounts of dragons as references to dinosaurs. They also often try to identify Job's behemoth with dinosaurs.

The case for identifying Job's behemoth as a dinosaur rests on God's description of this beast. Job 40:15-20 describes behemoth as a large, strong, herbivorous, marsh-dwelling creature. These descriptions all seem to fit that of the largest dinosaurs—the sauropods—especially the huge Brachiosaurus. One seemingly irrefutable argument favoring the dinosaur as Job's behemoth is the description of behemoth's tail (Job 40:17). "His tail sways like a cedar" (NIV). "In many commentaries, behemoth is said to be an elephant or a hippopotamus. However, this description is unlikely, since behemoth is said to have had a tail like a cedar (verse 17). Now if there is one thing an elephant's tiny tail is unlike, it is a cedar tree!"<sup>5</sup>

While the description in Job 40:15-24 does indeed seem to fit that of a large dinosaur, extant animals also fit the description. To try to prove that dinosaurs are mentioned in the Bible seems to bring about more ridicule of the Bible rather than to destroy evolutionary thinking. It seems best to identify Job's behemoth with a known living animal today. In order to make

such an identification we must examine the divine description recorded in the biblical text.

### ***The Divine Description of Behemoth***

God invited Job to “look at behemoth” as an example of His great creative power. Evidently, Job was well aware of the behemoth, or could observe its habits if he so desired. God “then described his diet (40:15b), physical strength (40:16-18), habitat (40:20-23), and fierceness (40:24).”<sup>6</sup>

Behemoth was an herbivorous creature, feeding on grass like an ox. It possessed great strength, including muscular limbs and belly. Verse 17 says that behemoth’s tail “sways like a cedar,” a description that may seem to rule out the hippopotamus or elephant. However, this Hebrew phrase is open to varying translations. “The rendering that his tail sways like a cedar (possibly meaning a cedar branch, not a cedar trunk) suggests to some that ‘tail’ means the trunk of an elephant. However, Ugaritic parallels indicate that the verb ‘sways’ (which occurs only here in the OT) means ‘stiffens.’ In that case the hippopotamus’ tail, though small, was referred to. The tail stiffens when the animal is frightened or is running.”<sup>7</sup> Behemoth lived “under the lotus plants” in a watery environment, while “the hills bring him their produce” possibly meaning that “its sustenance (perhaps vegetation) floats down from the hills.”<sup>8</sup> Behemoth was a worthy adversary for anyone who would try to capture it or domesticate it. This creature, while great in size and strength, merely pointed to the greater strength of its Creator!

### ***God’s Lesson from the Behemoth***

While it is not possible to claim with absolute certainty the identification of the behemoth, the hippopotamus seems to remain the most likely candidate based on the description in Job 40:15-24. “On the whole it seems best to identify it with a giant hippopotamus, native to the upper reaches of the Nile.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the hippopotamus was well known in ancient times as a beast of great, untamable strength. “Egyptian records picture hippos being hunted with harpoons and barbed hooks.”<sup>10</sup> It would, however, be difficult to be “captured or harpooned when only his

eyes or nose show above the water (v. 24).”<sup>11</sup> The following description of the hippopotamus may help justify its identity as the behemoth. “The hippopotamus . . . lays waste whole plantations of the sugar-cane, rice, and other grain. When irritated or wounded, it will attack boats and men with much fury. . . . Its head is large; its mouth, very wide; its skin, thick and almost devoid of hair; and its tail, naked and about a foot long. It is nearly as large as the elephant, and some have been found seventeen feet long.”<sup>12</sup>

God pointed out the behemoth as a significant creature in His zoological garden. In so doing, God was reminding Job that He is a powerful, majestic, and trustworthy God. Even the behemoth submits to Him. Shouldn’t God’s people, who know God personally and intelligently, be even more eager to trust and submit to the all-powerful and all-loving Creator of the universe?

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<sup>1</sup> Koehler, Ludwig and Baumgartner, Walter. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984, footnote at Job 40:15.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Zuck, Roy. *Job*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Ham, Ken; Snelling, Andrew; Wieland, Carl. *The Answers Book*. El Cajon, CA: Master Books, 1990, p.33.

<sup>5</sup> Ham, Snelling, and Wieland, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Zuck, 1978, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> Zuck, Roy B. “Job” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985, p. 772.

<sup>8</sup> Zuck, 1985, p. 772.

<sup>9</sup> Archer, Gleason L. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> Zuck, 1978, pp. 178-179.

<sup>11</sup> Zuck, 1985, p. 772.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke, Adam. *Commentary and Critical Notes*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d., vol. III, p. 185.