

Dinosaurs in the Bible

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Creation scientists say dinosaurs roamed the earth before Noah’s Flood and possibly later, even into recent times. So why don’t we find the word ‘dinosaur’ in any Bible today?

The word ‘dinosaur’ only came into print in 1841 in the writings of Richard Owen, a palaeontologist. Therefore it couldn’t possibly have found a place in the King James Bible. As for Bibles published since 1841, science and religion became so estranged and theistic evolution so popular that it never seems to have occurred to Hebrew scholars that terms for dinosaurs would be found in Scripture. The belief that dinosaurs died out 70 million years ago, long before Hebrew existed, dominated the thinking of most translators.

There is even a residual minority among true fundamentalists who think that dinosaurs are a figment of the imagination. However, bones existing in today’s world do point to the past existence of creatures like the imaginary drawings in science books. Even if the sketches are wrong in detail, it is likely that animals like them did once live on the earth in large numbers.

The difference between creationist and evolutionary views concerns the date they are believed to have inhabited the earth. Evolutionists date them no later than 70 million years ago, while creationists date them no earlier than some few thousand years ago.

What was their habitat? The Bible may shed some light on this, assuming we have identified the Hebrew terms correctly. In this connection, note one aspect of fossil remains that is seldom highlighted. It is that about 95% of fossils can be classed as remains of marine creatures.¹ At first encounter, this classification might seem strange resulting from a ‘Flood’. Wouldn’t land animals be more likely to die than marine creatures?

One has to realize that land animals would make strong efforts to survive, many trying to swim away. Also, the ‘Flood’ included ‘the fountains of the great deep’, which M. Morris and others have associated with tectonic and volcanic activity,² providing rapid fossilization of the marine creatures that were closer to the sources of activity. Land creatures would be more likely to drown and remain on the surface, eventually rotting away. Sea creatures would become enveloped in sediment and become part of rapidly forming sedimentary rocks. This may be the reason why we find so few human fossils.

Because of this factor, it is also likely that dinosaur remains would be largely of the marine type, such as

plesiosaurs. But what does the Bible say about large marine creatures?

There are four Hebrew words which are candidates for ‘dinosaur’ in some sense or other as indicated in Table 1.

Hebrew Form	Romanised Form	Frequency in Scripture
	<i>t(h)annin</i>	29, spread over 12 books
	<i>livyathan</i>	5, found in 3 books
	<i>behemoth</i>	1, in book of Job
	<i>rahabh</i>	5, found in 3 books

Table 1. The four Hebrew words which are candidates for ‘dinosaur’.

The first form is most frequently translated in the King James Bible as ‘dragon’. The rest are usually left untranslated. Details of *t’annin* are listed in Table 2.

The basic form *t’annin* is singular, with alternative plurals *t’annim* and *t’anninim*. *Thannoth* is in what is called the ‘construct state’ or dependent form. Translations show that singular and plural are sometimes irregular. Confusion may have been due to the similarity of the endings *-in* and *im*. The common root appears to be the syllable *-t’an-*. Thus the word *livya-than* appears to be related to *t’annin*.

In addition to the 40 Old Testament examples above, the Bible contains another 13 in the New Testament, all examples being in the Greek form , ‘dragon’, all in Revelation and most applying clearly to Satan.

Of the three Hebrew forms usually untranslated, *rahabh* will only be found in three places in the King James Bible. In Job 26:12 it is translated ‘the proud’, and in Isaiah 30:7 ‘strength’. In other versions, including the equally old Lutheran translation, it is left as ‘Rahab’.

The form *t’annin* is used for the serpents produced from sticks in Pharaoh’s court,³ and this strengthens the link between snakes and dragons. Also a word (*saraph*),⁴ ‘serpent’ is used for the copper snake Moses made for Israelites bitten by poisonous (‘fiery’) snakes. When this later became an idol it was called (*nechush-*

Romanized Form	Frequency	King James Version Translation
<i>t'annim</i>	12	dragons
	1	dragon
	1	whale
<i>t'annin</i>	5	dragon
	2	serpent
	1	whale
	1	sea-monsters
<i>t'anninim</i>	3	dragons
	1	serpents
	1	whales
<i>thannoth</i>	1	dragons-of (construct state)

Table 2. Details of *t'annin*.

tan),⁵ which seems to be a play on words between *nachash*, 'serpent' and the root *t'an*. Does all this suggest that the creatures indicated by these words are reptilian?

Some would not accept *t'an* as the phono-semantic element in *nechushtan* and in *livyathan* representing a 'monster'. In fact, Gesenius⁶ sees the words divided rather differently, that is, as *nechusht-an*, *levyat-an*, where *-an* is a masculine place suffix. However, these are the only two words with that form of the suffix, which in the other eight examples is in the form *-on*. He also modifies his conjecture in our two cases with 'probably'.

Since the proposed base of *nechushtan* is *nechosheth*, with its feminine suffix *-eth*, and since *levyathan* is said to be derived from *livyah*, which contains no *t*, this derivation looks somewhat suspect.

As far as reptilian classification is concerned, one reference to *t'an* in Lamentations 4:3 indicates the possession of breasts from which the young are suckled. However, if dinosaurs have any affinities with the sub-order Sauria, it has been claimed that 'some lizards bear live young',⁷ though this does not presuppose breast-feeding.

Furthermore, early descriptions of these large creatures projected from fossil bones by scientists often related to mammals. The first word used was not 'dinosaur' ('fearsome lizard'), but 'deinothere' ('fearsome beast'), based on Greek *deinos*, 'terrible, fearsome' and *therion*, 'beast'. This could include birds and mammals as well as reptiles.

At this point it is pertinent to note that the New International Version (NIV) translates *t'annim* as 'jackals' as shown in Table 3.

We note that even *tannin* has been translated 'jackal' in two cases, despite Gesenius' definition as 'serpent, dragon, sea-monster'. It seems the NIV went to the supposed root *tannah*, 'howl' for its interpretation. Noting the context of dry or derelict places associated with these examples, they regarded the jackal as a more likely 'howler' than any dinosaur, if only because they did not believe such creatures would be alive then.

It should also be noted that the Septuagint (LXX) translates using the Greek word from which we get the English 'siren' some seven times, and twice uses 'dragon'. The Oxford English Dictionary reports the original meaning of 'siren' from Homer's *Odyssey* onwards as 'an imaginary species of serpent'; 'one of several fabulous monsters, part woman, part bird, who were supposed to lure sailors to destruction by their enchanting singing'; '*the mud-iguana ... native to North America*' (about which Linnaeus was told '*that it had a sort of singing voice*'). No doubt the wailing of sirens on ambulances, fire engines and police cars is connected with the original meaning of 'siren'.

In Europe in the early Middle Ages we find the tale of Grendel. One possible meaning of his name comes from Old Norse *grenja*, 'bellow, groan, howl'. If this Grendel is indeed the elaboration of an original true account of a dinosaur, this is yet another association of howling with large creatures of reptilian or similar type.⁸

But how does Scripture characterize these creatures? Perhaps the most familiar name to creationists is that of the *behemoth*, which eats grass, drinks a lot, has strong bones, loins and belly, and moves its tail like a cedar, is tightly sinewed, lies in shade among reeds and feeds 'in the mountains'. (See Job 40:15-24.)

Livyathan could be described in great detail, but in addition to its tough, dangerous exterior, it emits sparks, light, flame and smoke. It plays in the ocean, stirring it into foam, yet eats food given to desert-dwellers. It is compared to the 'piercing or crooked serpent'. (See Job 41:1-34; Isaiah 27:1.)

Rahab is associated with the sea and with Babylon and Egypt, and is lazy. (See Job 26:12; Psalm 87:4; 89:10; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9.) Finally, *t'annin* from its 29 references is described as created to live in water, having eight clear references to sea, rivers and other watery places. Yet there are also 12 references to desert places. This creature snorts, wails, and can devour or crush, swallow and vomit. One form of it can suckle young.

What are we to make of all this? In particular there is a contrast between reptilian and mammalian features and between ocean and desert habitat. It is said of dinosaurs that some were aquatic and others lived in drier surroundings, so here biblical and scientific descriptions appear to match.

If 'dragon' was the favourite translation in days when

Old Testament Book	Form	Frequency	LXX
Nehemiah	<i>(tannin)</i>	1	Greek for 'fig'
Job	<i>tannim</i>	1	
Psalms	<i>tannim</i>	1	Not in LXX
Isaiah	<i>thannim</i>	4	(3 only)
Jeremiah	<i>tannim</i>	5	(2 only)
Lamentations	<i>(tannin)</i>	1	Not in LXX
Micah	<i>tannim</i>	1	
Malachi	<i>(thannoth)</i>	1	Not in LXX

Table 3. New International Version (NIV) translations of *t'annim* as 'jackals'.

scientific reports of the day attached this word to sightings of huge creatures in remote parts of Europe and China, it suggests that the translators of the King James Bible weren't just guessing or romancing. As for 'sea-monsters', we hear reports even today of sightings and discoveries of 'sea-serpent'-like creatures.⁹

It is well known that reality is subdivided differently in different cultures. It is linguistically sound to state that the four or five names we find for large creatures in Scripture are not likely to be based on reproductive methods or habitats, and there are obvious overlaps. Yet this doesn't mean they are used haphazardly or indiscriminately.

The broadest classifier must surely be the root *-t'an-*. The others will then represent more specialized kinds of 'dinosaur'. And even the word 'dinosaur' is hardly precise amongst palaeontologists and is subject to minor adjustments as further discoveries are made. Roughly speaking, then, we suggest that the syllable *-t'an-* represented to the Hebrew mind a large, usually shy creature, living away from human habitation, either in water or in 'desert' or deserted (that is, uninhabited) places. Its appearance was frightening to humans, but this may in some cases have been related only to its size. After all, elephants are usually peaceful creatures when not attacked, but they can be a menace to car drivers in game parks, merely through human panic or because of sheer size.

Since no two equivalents in different languages are precisely identical in meaning, there seems to be no valid objection to our matching the common words *t'annin* and its variants to our equally vague term 'dinosaur' in English.

REFERENCES

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2. Genesis 7:11, as generally understood by creation scientists, for example, Dr . M. Morris in *The Genesis Record*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan (1976).

3. Exodus 7:9, 10, 12.
4. It has been suggested that this may be a rare sample of a Semitic word coming into Indo-European languages via Greek. Root S-R-P is found in Greek (*herpeton*), where the common sound change s>h>s explains the form 'serpent'.
5. 2 Kings 18:4.
6. Kautzsch, E. (ed.), trans. A. E. Cowley: Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, #86f, p. 240.
7. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979 edition, Macropaedia, vol. 16, p. 283.
8. Cooper, B., 1992. The early history of man — Part 4. Living dinosaurs from Anglo-Saxon and other early records. *CEN Tech. J.*, 6(1):49–66 (p. 62).
9. Creation magazine, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 8, and other similar reports.

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