

# Could Behemoth have been a dinosaur?

David Porter

Allan Steel's article 'Could Behemoth have been a dinosaur?'<sup>1</sup> is a clever, scholarly smoke-screen for very poor, if popular, exegesis of Job 40:15–24.

To begin with, Job 40:17a states that Behemoth moved his tail in a cedar-like manner, not that the animal's tail was cedar-like. Steel himself provides a goodly number of alternative translations of Job 40:17a and none of them, save the questionable *Statenvertaling*, refer 'like a cedar' to Behemoth's tail. The issue, then, is how movement can be described as cedar-like, not how a tail can be described as cedar-like. Steel misses this point entirely.

There is only one sense in which cedar-imagery is used in Scripture. Comparisons with the cedar always have the tree's great height in view. Thus, for example, 2 Kings 19:23 metaphorically refers to the leaders of Lebanon as 'tall cedars'. The cedar, according to Isaiah, is 'lofty and lifted up' (Isaiah 2:13) and is used in conjunction with numerous other metaphors to represent 'everyone who is proud and lofty ... everyone who is lifted up' (Isaiah 2:12). The Amorites, in so far as they were once the most powerful of the nations, possessed 'height ... like the height of cedars' (Amos 2:9). The cedar is also used in Ezekiel 17:3–24 to symbolize the king/kingdom of Judah. Particularly Ezekiel 17:22, 23 and 24 emphasize that the height of the cedar is at issue. The cedar is 'lofty', 'stately' and 'high'. Again, in Ezekiel 31:2–14, the cedar is employed as a symbol for the king/kingdom of Assyria. Ezekiel 31:3, 4, 5, 7, 10 and 14 emphasize that the height of the cedar is the issue. The cedar is 'very high; ... its top among the clouds', 'high', 'loftier than all the trees of the field', 'beautiful in its greatness', 'high in stature ... it has set its top among the clouds and its heart is haughty in its loftiness'.

Steel cites Psalm 92:12 and asserts that this is an example of cedar-imagery where great size and strength are the issue rather than height. This is extremely doubtful. The psalmist's imagery is entirely consistent with the way in which cedar-imagery is used in the passages quoted above—passages where any ambiguity in meaning is removed. Mighty-men are often likened to trees in Scripture (e.g. Judges 9:8–20; 2 Kings 14:9; Ezekiel 17:3–24; Daniel 4:10–37). The psalmist in declaring that 'the righteous shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon' is asserting that God will assure them great (metaphorical) spiritual stature—a stature greater than the other metaphorical 'trees' of the 'forest' of mankind.

Steel (commendably) asserts his conviction that

Scripture is infallible. Clearly, he believes that Scripture is divinely inspired. It is something of a surprise to find him consequently shying away from the kindred doctrine that Scripture is, and should be, its own interpreter. That is, he chooses to believe that Job is somehow independent of the body of Scripture—because it contains a number of textual peculiarities and is probably older than other books—and 'need not be strictly interpreted in the light of the common imagery found elsewhere in the OT'. The doctrine that Scripture is its own interpreter, however, is a safe-guard against private interpretation. Steel chooses to except Job from the principle that Scripture should interpret Scripture because he wants to force a dinosaurian interpretation regarding Behemoth's tail onto Job 40:17a. He is reading into Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to interpret itself. He is attempting to defend a 'tradition of the (creationist) elders' rather than allowing the Word of God to speak for itself.

Further to the above, it is ironic that Steel wants to read a novel interpretation of cedar-imagery into Job 40:17a but uses Scripture to refute the idea that the tail of Behemoth was actually the animal's trunk. His argument is undoubtably sound—Scripture only uses *zânâb* to mean 'the base or end of something, or inferiority'. However, if the fact that texturally 'Job is independent in several ways from other OT books ... and is probably old' justifies the reading into the text of speculative interpretations of imagery, what is to rule out the possibility that originally *zânâb* referred to both posterior and anterior appendages or that the Hebrew is a faulty translation of an original non-Hebrew word which meant either trunk or tail? Context is otherwise entirely consistent with this possibility. Steel's argument that 'the animal cannot have a trunk (described by 'tail') and also a distinct nose' (Job 40:17) is forced, to say the least. What he is asserting is that Scriptural poetry never employs synonyms. He also ignores the likelihood that Job 40:17b is simply idiomatic for 'can anyone domesticate him?' and cannot creditably be forced into yielding the finer details of Behemoth's anatomy.

Scripture dictates that the most natural meaning of the cedar-imagery in Job 40:17a is simply that Behemoth raised or erected its tail high in the air—like a cedar. Steel notes the Septuagint's (LXX) choice of *erects* for the Hebrew *yachêpôts*. His statement that 'the LXX translators were following an interpretative tradition which was based on a better knowledge of the Hebrew word or its origin' is not, however, 'pure speculation'. The LXX is supported in this instance by an examination of the way in which cedar-imagery is used in the rest of Scripture. The Scripture nowhere uses cedar-imagery to simply imply bigness or great length. The Shulammitte's beloved was not longer or bigger than other men but, specifically, taller in stature (Song of Songs 5:15). When 2 Kings 19:23 refers to the leaders of Lebanon as 'tall cedars' this does not imply that they were also (metaphorically) longer or bigger than other men. Judah and/or its king was not longer or bigger than

the surrounding nations/kings but metaphorically of greater stature or 'stately' and 'high'; the same is true where the kings/kingdoms of Assyria and the Amorites are at issue (Ezekiel 31:2–14; Amos 2:9). The argument that a cedar lying on the ground is extremely long and so, therefore, length or size but not vertical height can be taken as the natural sense of Job 40:17a is unabashed twisting of Scriptural imagery. Steel is simply attempting to force a dinosaur into the passage.

Steel is guilty of at least one other subtle act of 'Scripture twisting' in an effort to find a dinosaur in Job 40:15–24. He offers 'colossal beast' as a transliteration of 'Behemoth' and then arbitrarily interprets 'chief of the ways of God' (Job 40:19) to mean that Job had one of the largest, 'if not the largest', beasts in God's creation in mind. The aim is clearly to create the impression that only a beast as big as a sauropod could possibly be at issue. 'Behemoth', however, no more means colossal beast than *Elohim* means colossal God! As Steel notes, both 'Behemoth' and *Elohim* are intensives or majestic plurals. The most reasonable conclusion is that *Elohim*—'gods'—is a contraction of 'God of gods' and 'behemoth'—'beasts'—a contraction of 'beast of beasts'. The most natural interpretation would be that Behemoth was viewed by the writer of Job as king of the beasts—just as God is the ruler of every other ruler (gods). 'Chief of the ways of God', consequently, is reasonably interpreted in this sense and certainly *re'shiyth*—'chief'—is elsewhere used in Scripture to signify a ruling class or dominant race (e.g. Exodus 4:22–23; Numbers 24:20; Amos 6:1). The lion is currently king of the beasts. The lion is neither the largest animal currently alive nor even a very large animal. Behemoth may well have been a larger rather than smaller animal, given the emphasis in Job 40:15–24 on the animals formidable strength, but a 'colossal beast' is nowhere implied.

*Contra* Steel, the elephant is easily read out of Job 40:15–24. Job 40:17a presents not the slightest difficulty in this regard and Steel's other objections to the elephant are equally as inconsequential.

All that the cedar-imagery of Job 40:17a asserts is that Behemoth raised its tail high in the air 'like a cedar'. The elephant raises its tail high in the air when angry or alarmed. The hunter would naturally be very interested in this seeming triviality as it would signal that the animal was aware of his presence and prepared for self-defence—and 'can anyone capture him when he is on watch' (Job 40:24). As argued above, the only reason Steel finds the elephant's tail 'completely inappropriate' for comparison with the cedar is that it is not the size or length of a cedar. Cedar-imagery, however, always has the height of the cedar in mind, not its size or length, and Job 40:17a is concerned with cedar-like movement not cedar-like size or shape.

Steel also attempts to rule the elephant out of contention by pointing out that 'The elephant is outstanding for its trunk, its great size (especially its feet), its enormous appetite and its ears. None of these unique features are

mentioned in our passage, but they ought to have been, if Behemoth was the elephant.'

Steel is surely guilty of a little inconsistency here; *he* argues that Behemoth was colossal. Though he is mistaken on this count, clearly a large animal *is* at issue. The elephant's great size is, therefore, accommodated in Job 40:15–24.

Job 40:15 also clearly mentions Behemoth's appetite. Behemoth ate grass—presumably large quantities of grass, given that it was a large animal. The elephant's staple diet is grass.<sup>2</sup> Studies have shown that where trees and other vegetation are lacking, grass comprises 80 to 90 percent of their diet.<sup>3</sup> Where some ancient elephants were concerned, grasses and sedges dominated the animals diet. Grass comprised perhaps as much as 90% of the Shandrin mammoth's (*M. primigenius*) stomach contents; and dung, reasonably thought to have belonged to the Colombian mammoth (*M. columbi*), comprised 95% grass and sedge by weight.<sup>4</sup>

Steel's comment regarding the elephant's ears only works if Behemoth was a modern, large eared elephant. If Behemoth was a mammoth, for example, the animal's ears may have been quite tiny. Three extant adult carcasses of *M. primigenius* indicate that this creature had very small ears, each about one-fifteenth of those of an African elephant.<sup>5</sup>

In the final analysis, however, Steel's argument works both ways. Steel clearly wishes to understand Behemoth to have been a sauropod. If this were so, we would expect to read a description of a beast with a very long neck, a tiny head, a truly immense body, enormous columnar legs (and even larger feet), an even more enormous appetite as well as a very long tail, in Job 40:15–24. The passage certainly mentions none of these distinctives—the more so if Steel is happy to ignore references to Behemoth's diet and his own arguments to the effect that the animal was a 'colossal beast'. At the end of the day, it is clear that Steel is happy to find a sauropod in Job 40:15–24 if only one distinctive feature is mentioned—for him, the creature's enormous tail.

Well, if one distinctive is sufficient to the task, what of Job 40:18? This passage appears to mention one distinctive which only applies to the elephant. Job 40:18 may be reasonably interpreted as describing the elephant's tusks. The passage twice refers to bones ('*etsem*, *gerem*) which were shaped like tubular bars ('*aphiyq*, *metiy*l). These bones appear to have been visible in the living Behemoth, for Job is surely describing the living creature, and were one of the reasons why the animal was to be feared.<sup>6</sup> The elephant's tusks answer admirably to the bones of Behemoth. Tusks look like bones, are frequently mistaken for bones and could quite reasonably be poetically described as bones. Similarly, the sword of Job 40:19 is reasonably interpreted as another poetic reference to Behemoth's tusks. The hunter would certainly be concerned about the elephant's 'bones' whereas the animals trunk would typically be tucked out of the way as it prepared to defend itself and would not,

therefore, warrant mention in a hunting poem.

Steel finally attempts to dismiss the elephant with ‘the elephant retreats to the depth of the forest during the hot part of the day. This does not seem to fit with Job 40:21, which suggests that Behemoth spends his time in marshy areas.’ In fact Job 40:20 places Behemoth in the ‘mountains’ where ‘all the beasts of the field play’, Job 20:21 places Behemoth in the marshes and Job 40:22 places Behemoth amongst the ‘willows of the brook’. There is no mention of time of day. Elephants spend a considerable amount of time in water<sup>7</sup> as well as under the shade of trees.<sup>8</sup> They range over enormous distances through a variety of habitats<sup>9</sup> and are variously found in mountainous regions and regions such as the sparsely treed Kaokoveld and the deserts of Namibia.<sup>10</sup> Ancient elephants such as *M. trogontherii* and *M. columbi* appear to have lived predominantly in grassland environments.<sup>11</sup> If Behemoth was a particularly large species of ancient elephant, this would fit neatly with it also being predominantly a grasslands elephant.<sup>12</sup>

It is indisputable that the most natural interpretation of Genesis is that man and the dinosaurs were created together and lived side-by-side for many ages of the Earth. It would be entirely reasonable to allow for the possibility that we might find mention of dinosaurs alive in ancient times in Scripture. With every other creationist, I would be overjoyed if Job mentioned dinosaurs and, perhaps, this is the case where Leviathan is concerned. Sound exegesis, however, suggests that a dinosaur is not obviously or even probably mentioned in Job 40:15–24 for all Steel’s efforts. This should not be treated as a major body-blow to creationism, however. Creationism does not stand or fall because Job 40:15–24 describes the elephant! Creationism will be very poorly served, however, by over-commitment to what is clearly a very questionable exegesis. Critics relish such easy pickings where more telling counter-arguments fail. It is a great concern to me that creationism has aligned itself uncritically with a dinosaurian interpretation of Job 40:15–24 and, in my view, demonstrated extreme reluctance to properly and fairly consider other alternatives.

### References

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2. Eltringham, S.K., Shoshani, J., Lee, P.C., Sukumar, R., Barnett, J., de Alwis, L., Lahari-Choudhury, D.K., Luxmoore, R.A. and Ward, D., *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Elephants: From Their Origins and Evolution to Their Ceremonial and Working Relationship with Man*, Smithmark, Salamander Books, London, p. 79, 1997.
3. Law, R.M., Parker, I.S.C. and Johnstone, R.C.B., *Elephants And Their Habitats: The Ecology Of Elephants in North Bunyoro, Uganda*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp.176–179, 201, 1975.
4. Lister, A. and Bahn, P., *Mammoths*, Boxtree, London, pp. 74, 76, 1995.
5. Lister and Bahn, Ref. 4, p. 72.
6. Perhaps Job 33:21 has relevance to this point: ‘His flesh wastes away from sight, and his bones *which were not seen* stick out’ (emphasis added).
7. Eltringham *et al.*, Ref. 2, p. 85.

8. Freedman, D., *Elephants: The Vanishing Giants*, Hamlyn, London, Sydney, Toronto, p. 38, 1980.
9. Orenstein, R. (Ed.), *Elephants: the Deciding Decade*, Sandstone Books, Leichhardt, NSW, p. 44, 1997; Douglas-Hamilton, I. and Douglas-Hamilton, O., *Among the Elephants*, Viking Press, New York, pp. 231–232, 1975; Bosman, P. and Hall-Martin, A., *Elephants Of Africa*, New Holland, London, p. 74, 1989.
10. Orenstein, Ref. 9, p. 44; Bosman and Hall-Martin, Ref. 9, p. 13.
11. Lister and Bahn, Ref. 4, p. 74.
12. Open country elephants are generally bigger than forest dwelling species. For example, the elephants of the Kaokoveld and adjoining arid regions are the tallest on record (shoulder height of 3.5 m or more in adults bulls), then come the Mozambique or Kruger elephants, the forest elephants of Gabon and Zaire and lastly the small rain forest elephants of West Africa (shoulder height of 2.2 m in adult bulls); (Bosman and Hall-Martin, Ref. 9, p. 13). A similar rule also appears to hold for extinct elephants (Lister and Bahn, Ref. 4, pp. 13, 24, 25).

### Allan Steel replies:

First of all, let me emphasize that I was in no way whatsoever trying to force the interpretation of a dinosaur into the passage, as Mr Porter repeatedly claims. The primary purpose of my article was to make a careful analysis of the Hebrew text of Job 40:17a. The secondary purpose was to consider the suitability of common suggestions for Behemoth in the light of this.

I was certainly not claiming that Behemoth must have been a dinosaur! Rather, I was considering whether a dinosaur is a reasonable possibility. The very title of my article (‘Could Behemoth have been a Dinosaur?’) should have made this clear. I effectively answered ‘yes’ to my title, but if my title had been ‘Was Behemoth a Dinosaur?’ then I would not have been able to answer the title question.

In contrast to my cautious position of suggesting possibilities, Porter very strongly rejects the interpretation of the dinosaur, but nowhere gives any explicit reasons why it must be rejected! He also is very adamant that Behemoth must have been the elephant (but also switches to the extinct mammoth at one point (see below)).

Porter ignores my detailed analysis of the Hebrew verb in verse 17a and the varying translations which I quoted which show the difficulty of the clause. He simply assumes that the verb is one of motion, but we cannot be absolutely sure that this is the correct sense. He states that Behemoth’s tail ‘moved in cedar-like manner’ and later he also states: ‘Job 40:17a is concerned with cedar-like movement not cedar-like size or shape’. But this would mean that Behemoth’s tail moved in the same way that a cedar moved. So can someone please tell us what cedar-like movement is, and what distinguishes it from the movement of any other particular type of tree? Porter lays great stress on the idea that the reference to a cedar must imply great vertical height. But this is cedar-like orientation, not cedar-like movement! Many

of his quotes from Scripture refer to the cedar in a figurative sense (referring to people, nations and kingdoms), so are not really relevant to physical orientation or movement (surely the figurative idea is great power, prestige or majesty).

When I said that Job is independent in some ways from the other OT books, I was only referring to the fact that Job is certainly separate from the nation of Israel, has no references to Abraham, Moses, etc., and is not necessarily set in the land of Israel like most of the other OT books. So the ‘cedars of Lebanon’ which are mentioned in other OT books are not necessarily in view in this verse. But I didn’t intend to make a big issue out of this point.

Thus it is a wild exaggeration of my point about Job’s relative independence when Porter suggests that, according to my principles, ‘tail’ could be ‘independently’ interpreted as ‘trunk’. There is no justification for interpreting the word (which is not a literary expression) in a different sense to the simple common meaning found throughout the rest of Scripture. Anyway, where has the word ‘tail’ ever been used to mean ‘nose’ in any language (not just Hebrew), when the word ‘nose’ (or ‘trunk’) already exists? It is strange that Porter practically argues here in some detail that interpreting ‘tail’ as ‘nose’ is feasible, but in his interpretation later on, he takes tail to mean the (elephant’s) simple tail. So why does he emphasize this?

Porter accepts the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the verb as *erects*. I would be happy with this sense, if it could be proven to be correct, but it would not affect my conclusions very much. Yet is difficult to be sure about the sense of the verb. Porter’s main argument seems to be that Behemoth’s tail is lifted up vertically, but is this a distinct characteristic of the elephant anyway? In all of the photos of elephants and TV documentary segments about elephants which I have been able to examine, the elephant’s tail is predominantly horizontal when the elephant is excited, running, charging, etc.! Also, if this ‘lifting up’ idea really must be insisted on, then I reply that many extinct animals (including possibly dinosaurs) may have lifted their tails vertically, so what does this ‘lifting up’ idea really prove?

Porter criticizes heavily my statement that the title ‘Behemoth’ probably suggests ‘colossal beast’. But I was simply introducing the Hebrew word ‘Behemoth’ at the beginning of my article and did not intend to attach any significance to this point at all. I only repeated what is commonly suggested without dispute by most commentators of all persuasions. If Porter wants to interpret the word as ‘king of the beasts’, then that makes very little difference.

In any case, the elephant is currently the largest-known land animal, so calling it ‘colossal beast’ should suit his position too: the elephant is certainly colossal compared to man!

It is very surprising that Porter insists very strongly that Behemoth must be the elephant (so the modern elephant is naturally in view to the reader), but then he later switches to the extinct mammoth, and then back to the (modern)

elephant again at the end. But if he advocates an extinct animal such as the mammoth, then he has almost reached my position! That is, no current living animal fits the passage satisfactorily, so Behemoth is most likely an extinct animal (and I suggested that a dinosaur is a reasonable possibility). Also, we cannot be very sure about the habitats and behaviour of extinct animals, yet Porter mixes features of modern elephants with features of the extinct mammoth. It is very difficult to identify in the passage a particular extinct animal (such as the mammoth or even a particular type of dinosaur) with rigorous proof.

As for the claim that all the features of a sauropod are not given in the passage, I reply that my main point was that the passage seems to refer to very distinctive bodily features—not every feature of the animal! Again, I was not emphasizing a sauropod to the exclusion of everything else, as Porter repeatedly claims, but an extinct animal (of which some type of dinosaur is a good possibility). But considering distinctive features, if you were to see an elephant’s tail for the first time, would you think of a cedar (even if you were obsessed with the idea that a cedar implies great vertical height)?

Porter’s taking of Behemoth’s bones and the sword of Job 40:18–19 as tusks are also arbitrary, to say the least. More importantly, in this passage the infallible LORD is speaking to Job to humble him, so the passage cannot be taken in any way as a ‘hunting poem’, as Porter suggests!

Porter is very happy to accept that man and dinosaurs lived together in the past, and we would all agree that Creationism does not stand or fall according to our interpretation of Job 40. So why is Porter so concerned to assert that Behemoth must have been the elephant (or mammoth to be more precise?) and cannot have been a type of dinosaur?

Older conservative commentators thought Behemoth was the elephant because that was the largest known land animal, but that was before fossils of large extinct animals were found in great numbers, so a large extinct animal did not really occur to them! Does Porter believe that dinosaurs must have died out before Job’s time so that is why he is strongly against the dinosaur possibility for Behemoth?

Finally, he is certainly much more sure about what Behemoth was than I am. Indeed, if anyone were to assert that Behemoth was certainly a dinosaur, then I would disagree, since we cannot be absolutely sure with our current state of knowledge. But I still believe that it is currently the most reasonable possibility.