An Awfully Beastly Business: Some Thoughts on behēmāh in Jonah and Qoheleth

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1 Context

Many years ago Elias Bickerman described Jonah, Daniel, Qoheleth and Esther as *Four Strange Books of the Bible*. His declared intention was to explore what they revealed of ‘the mentality of men of [the Hellenistic] period in the ancient Near East’.¹ While one response might be to wonder why he only found *four* strange books in Tanakh, I want rather to propose that two of them—Jonah and Qoheleth—share specific features which are not just strange, but suggest a shared eccentricity. Firstly, the fact that both present anti-heroes whose words and actions specifically deny the calling which they are supposed to exemplify: the traditional pious ḥākām and the Yahwistic prophet; and secondly, the presence in both of a dramatic deployment of animals (literally, behēmāh) at highly sensitive turns. It is the latter that I want to explore in this brief essay.

We are accustomed in the modern world to a variety of attitudes to animals which range from that of the full-blooded carnivore whose intent is to ‘kill-em-and-eat-em’ (the rarer the better) to their bitter opponents, the regiment of self-styled animal lovers who police the planet’s supposedly dwindling supply of bio-diversity while seemingly failing to notice—or perhaps to acknowledge—the complicity of pet cats in the catastrophic decline of European song-birds.² Contemporary movements to recognise the rights of animals and the ethical problems of human consumption of non-vegetable life have grown particularly strongly amongst the most secularised and post-Christian sections of Western society. That is not to say that Christian and Jewish scholars have been silent on this theme, nor that it is a matter of unconcern to devout people; however it does appear as one of the moralities which fulfil a quasi-religious role in the modern world.

Nevertheless, there are important strands in Tanakh which support some of the key principles of the concern for animal welfare and ethical human

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² This is a controversial claim, as a Google search will confirm. Equal numbers of confident and seemingly authoritative statements are made on both sides, with little sign (to the inexpert searcher) of any independent consensus.
regard for them. Indeed, as this paper argues, in important respects the ancient world was more in tune with the shared nature of human- and animal-kind than we are today. This observation prompts a further observation: that it is in a world where the Darwinian truth about the common origins of all life should by rights have nurtured a more empathetic attitude to animals, that we have brought to the status of a fine art factory processes for the production, slaughtering and distribution of all kinds of meat and fish protein. The Genesis injunction on Adam to take responsibility for creation (Gen. 1:28–30) has given way to the implications of the later permission to consume animal flesh and its consequent—and perfectly rational—response of fear of humankind on the part of animals (Gen. 9:1–3).

It is with these contradictory principles and emotions in mind that I turn to this review of the Biblical understanding of animals, with particular reference to my ‘two strange books’.

2 Survey: Beasts and Living Things in Tanakh

The two principal terms relevant to this review are behēmāh and ḥayyāh, both of which refer almost exclusively to four-footed creatures. Behēmāh seems to refer to larger, possibly domesticated animals, and that seems to be implied in Jonah. It should be noted, however, that the famous discussion in Qoh. 3:18–21 does not necessitate that restriction. Ḥayyāh has an obvious etymology in the root ḥāyāh ‘to be alive’, and includes both wild animals (‘the beasts of the fields’) and domesticated herds. There is no known etymology for behēmāh, though BDB (and so presumably Gesenius) postulates an ‘unused root’ *bhm with the supposed meaning ‘to be mute’.4

3 It is clear that there are many other life-forms named in Tanakh, things that creep, crawl and slither, and things that fly or swim. These belong to separate categories, and are not part of the present discussion. Indeed, some of the dietary and purity rules make it clear that they occupy a separate cultural niche.

4 The only plausibility this has seems to be a questionable association with the common phrase ‘dumb animals’, the only biblical support for which is the well-known declaration in Isa. 53:7:

...yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

Whatever this metaphor means, it cannot surely be literal dumbness; more likely the sense is that, just as animals cannot articulate their feelings (having no language we as humans can