The ant-lion

Nature study and the interpretation of a biblical text, from the Physiologus to Albert the Great

MIA I. GERHARDT

In the fourth chapter of the Book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite, the first of Job’s three friends to offer comment, suggests that Job cannot have been a righteous man; otherwise, he would not have incurred so dire a punishment.

4, 7. Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?
8. Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.
9. By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed.
10. The roaring of the lion, and the voice of the fierce lion, and the teeth of the young lions, are broken.
11. The old lion perisheth for lack of prey, and the stout lion’s whelps are scattered abroad.

The “old lion” of v. 11 represents the Hebrew word [layish], meaning a lion. The Vulgate, however, translates tigris:

4, 11. Tigris perit, eo quod non haberet praedam, et catuli leonis dissipati sunt.

The Septuagint features in this verse the unusual word μυρμηκολέων:

4, 11. μυρμηκολέων ὠλετο παρὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν βοράν, σκῦμνοι δὲ λεόντων ἔλιπον ἄλληλους.

which the Old Latin version transliterates as myrmicoleon:

4, 11. Myrmicoleon perit, eo quod non habet escam, et catuli leonum divisi sunt ab invicem.

1 See J. Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible; 2d. ed., revised by F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley, Edinburgh, 1963, s.v. lion. There is no mention of the meaning "old lion", which is found in the English Authorized Version and in the Dutch Statenvertaling.
2 In all the mss. represented in the Variorum edition: Biblia Sacra, iuxta Latinam vulgatam versionem ad codicum fidel [...] edita; vol. ix, Libri Heber et Job. Romae, 1951.
The display of these different translations of the passage inevitably raises the question: what is a μυρμηκολέων? The purpose of the following pages is to study the various interpretations and observations by which medieval authors have attempted to answer this question.

**ΜΥΡΜΗΚΟΛΕΩΝ, A LION**

To proceed in good order, it will be necessary to find out first of all what the Greek translator of JOB may have understood by the word he chose. Now, for all and sundry animals mentioned in the Bible, it still is most rewarding to turn to Samuel Bochart's HIEROZOICON¹ (1663). In the sixth and last Book of his Second Part, the learned author treats *De dubiis vel fabulosis animalibus*, among which chapter iv is devoted to the *Myrmecoleon*. The summary that serves as a chapter-heading admirably sums up the problem as it rested at the time, and takes a firm stand as to what must be considered the most plausible interpretation:


S. Bochart, Hierozoicon, II, col. 813.

In the body of the chapter, where all the information then obtainable on the subject is reproduced or referred to, Bochart gives excellent argumentation for his, undoubtedly correct, view that the term μυρμηκολέων in JOB 4, 11 denotes a kind of lion. He points out that the whole context, vv. 10 and 11, speaks of nothing but lions; that the Hebrew text reads [layish], one of the words for lion; and that more than one Greek author uses μυρμηκολέον or μύρμηξ to designate the lion. Thus he quotes Agatharchides² [2d c. B.C.]: “Eorum autem leonum qui vocantur myrmecoleontes, plerique a reliquis nihil differunt...”, Strabo [c. 63 B.C.-


² Bochart always gives the original text and a Latin translation; I quote the latter.