

Animal Names in the Bible: What Is Their Purpose?

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Abstract

The Creator provided the biblical record for the purpose of instructing mankind on who He is and how we are to live. Animals were a part of His creative acts, and the purpose of this study is to shed some light upon the role they play in helping mankind to live. The Bible's teaching on animals can be categorized in several ways, ranging from being just a fact of life, to being a teaching tool, to being a vital part of a direct act of God to accomplish His will. While all categories will be identified, the greatest emphasis will be given to the practical aspects animals shed on living today.

Keywords: Animals, Bible, category, use

Introduction

The Bible was provided by the Creator for mankind's use. It may be thought of as the "user's manual" for a very special part of His creation—mankind—whom He created in His own image (Genesis 1:26–27). The first two chapters of His written record describe some of the features of God's creative actions. In addition to having created mankind, He also created animals, the subject of this study. While much data was collected, analyzed, and is now presented, the primary emphasis for doing this study is to determine how the animals and their names are utilized in His written message. In other words,

- What was God's purpose for even mentioning animals?
- What role do the animals play in explaining the Creator's message to mankind?

While studying this material, keep the following points in mind:

- The Creator often uses the common (things and events) to accomplish the phenomenal; or, another way to state it is, He often uses the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary.
- The purpose here is to give the English reader a rough idea of the type of animals in Scripture. This study is not intended to be a precise scientific taxonomy. What is important is how each animal is used in the Bible—its purpose for being mentioned. That is, what role does each animal play in explaining the Creator's message to mankind?

Methodology

Documenting the animal names in Scripture turned out to be a task that was more difficult than originally imagined. The starting point was a search

of a concordance (Strong 2007) to record the names and their locations (book, chapter, verse). That process produced a number of issues that need to be considered when reading and using the results of this study.

1. The concordance used (Strong 2007) is based upon the King James Version (KJV). Therefore, unless otherwise noted, the verse quotations are from the KJV. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) and Today's New International Version (TNIV) were also consulted, but generally the results were not significantly different. It is appropriate at this point to further address what could be referred to as the 'KJV' issue.

- a. The KJV was chosen as the foundational translation for this study with the aim to present a general and high-level overview of the different uses of animals in Scripture. Other leading translations have also been included to give readers a sense of the diversity of interpretation that exists for the words in the original biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek). However, since the KJV is the translation chosen as the base text for this study, words were classified and arranged according to the KJV translation. One obvious limitation of this study must be admitted: that is, this work is based upon English translations instead of the original biblical languages. It is acknowledged that English words do not always correlate to the words in the original biblical languages. *Strong's Concordance* is tracking/referencing English words, *not* Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek words. As a result, *Strong's* and other English concordances often group together a different set of passages in which an English word occurs as opposed to the grouping of passages

that would result from the occurrences of the corresponding word in the original languages. However, assuming the general reliability and scholarship of the leading translations, this study should give readers a reasonably accurate understanding of the occurrences, uses, and roles of animals in Scripture. Nevertheless, this work can only serve as the starting point for any serious study, which would necessarily have to be based upon animal names as used in the original biblical languages.

- b. Because the KJV is the underlying translation for this work, no etymological connections should be assumed in the *original* languages between the animal's name which appears in the OTH category (see point 2 below) and the animal itself. For example, *sheep* and *sheepfold*, although connected etymologically in English, are not connected in Hebrew. Nor are *sheep* and *shepherd*. *Fishhook* and *fish* are also not connected in Hebrew (or in Greek either). Although *fish* and *fisherman* are connected in Hebrew, they are not connected in Greek. Despite this limitation, however, words that appear in the OTH category are obviously connected in *meaning* to the animal which appears in their name, and, therefore, the category is still instructive and included in this study.
- c. A separate study was made of Psalms, which is by far the longest book in the Bible. The verses containing animal names in Psalms were compared across three translations: KJV, NASB, and the TNIV with the following results:
 - i. **83%** of the verses with animal names use the same or essentially the same name in all three.
 - ii. **5%** of the verses with animal names omit a name in at least one translation, probably due to original language issues.
 - iii. **12%** of the verses with animal names use a different name in at least one translation, probably due to the translations' date of composition.

Based upon the longest book (Psalms), original language issues should have little impact upon determining how animals are generally used in Scripture, with very few exceptions.

2. At times, the context is essential in determining which animal is involved. For example, *beast* is often generic for *animal*. A good example is found in Acts 28:4 (KJV). While *beast* is used in that verse, the previous verse calls it a *viper*; the NASB uses *creature*; and the TNIV uses *snake*. Context is also necessary for correctly identifying homonyms. For example, *sow* can refer to the animal or the process of spreading seeds.

3. Translators, ancient and modern, have at times translated several different Hebrew words into one animal name in English. Note the examples in Table 1.

Table 1. Different Hebrew words translated into the same English word.

Animal Name	# of Occurrences in KJV English	# of Hebrew Words Translated as this Animal
beast	259	17*
horse	138	2
sheep	145	7
serpent	38	4

*Approx. 80.3% are translated from just 2 of the 17 Hebrew words: 51.7% from *be-hay-maw*, "larger animals," and 28.6% from *khah'-ee*, "living being/creature."

4. English versions differ in terms of which name is used or if no name is mentioned, as seen in these examples.

Isaiah 27:1—KJV uses *leviathan* and *crooked serpent*; some other versions use *twisted serpent* (NASB), *sea monster* (NET), *dragon of the sea* (NLT).

Proverbs 9:2—KJV uses *beast*, but NASB mentions no animal.

Leviticus 11:18—KJV uses *swan*; NET uses *white owl*.

Zechariah 13:5—*Cattle* appears in KJV, but no animal name appears in NASB.

Proverbs 30:28—KJV uses *spider*, but all others use *lizard*.

Acts 28:4—*beast* occurs in the KJV, *creature* in the NASB, and *snake* in the NIV.

5. Word spellings sometimes change over time; for example, *spunge* is now spelled *sponge*.
6. Only the singular forms of names are listed: that is, plural, possessive, and plural possessive forms are listed in the singular.
7. The number of verses cited for an animal is frequently less than the number of times the name is mentioned because an animal's name is often used more than once in a verse. Note: *All of the numerical data (counts) presented are of verses, not of all occurrences of the word itself (unless noted otherwise). For example, if a table indicates that "xyz" appears two times in the NT, it means that "xyz" appears in two verses even if it appears twice in one of those verses and three times in the other.*
8. In order to sort and present data in biblical order, each book was assigned a number, as seen in Table 2.

Once the names and the reference data were identified, they were organized in an Excel file in book, chapter, and verse order (see Appendix D in the

Table 2. Book numbers.

1	Genesis	12	2 Kings	23	Isaiah	34	Nahum	45	Romans	56	Titus
2	Exodus	13	1 Chronicles	24	Jeremiah	35	Habakkuk	46	1 Corinthians	57	Philemon
3	Leviticus	14	2 Chronicles	25	Lamentations	36	Zephaniah	47	2 Corinthians	58	Hebrews
4	Numbers	15	Ezra	26	Ezekiel	37	Haggai	48	Galatians	59	James
5	Deuteronomy	16	Nehemiah	27	Daniel	38	Zechariah	49	Ephesians	60	1 Peter
6	Joshua	17	Esther	28	Hosea	39	Malachi	50	Philippians	61	2 Peter
7	Judges	18	Job	29	Joel	40	Matthew	51	Colossians	62	1 John
8	Ruth	19	Psalms	30	Amos	41	Mark	52	1 Thessalonians	63	2 John
9	1 Samuel	20	Proverbs	31	Obadiah	42	Luke	53	2 Thessalonians	64	3 John
10	2 Samuel	21	Ecclesiastes	32	Jonah	43	John	54	1 Timothy	65	Jude
11	1 Kings	22	Song of Solomon	33	Micah	44	Acts	55	2 Timothy	66	Revelation

Supplemental Material). All animal names for each verse were entered in alphabetical order using the singular form. In the event a given name occurred more than once in the same verse, it was still listed only once.

The complete list of the animal names with explanations is presented in “Appendix A: Animal Names in the Bible with Explanations” in the Supplemental Material. As each name was identified, the verses in which it occurred were recorded.

Use Categories: The Process

Once the animals and verses were identified, an attempt was made to determine how they are used; that is, what role do they play in explaining the Creator’s message to mankind. Those uses were grouped into one of five categories. Before discussing those categories, a number of issues pertaining to that process need to be mentioned.

1. It is important to keep in mind that the animal names do not stand by themselves; rather, they are an integral part of their context: first, the verse in which they are in, and, at times, beyond that. Therefore, how animal names are used is determined by the context, which means that the use categories apply to the entire verse.
2. It was a difficult and somewhat subjective task; therefore, some specific results can be debated.
3. The reader’s theological position may have an impact upon both how a specific verse should be categorized and its meaning and/or application.
4. Some verses could legitimately have been placed in more than one category. For example, consider Exodus 16:20: “But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was very angry with them” (NASB). This verse could be classified as an example of God using the animal to teach something (BEX; see below), or as the Lord directing it (DIR; see below), or both. In this study, only one classification was assigned to each verse.

5. When the names for a given verse were listed, they were placed in alphabetical order, not in the order they appeared in the verse.
6. Each verse was placed into only one category, even when it contained more than one animal name.
7. When a verse qualified to be assigned to more than one category, the most significant category was assigned.

At times, the difference between categories was not clear, and, in some cases, it could have gone either way. Notice these examples:

- a. 1 Kings 13:24–26 presents the account of a prophet being killed by a lion sent by the Lord as punishment for his disobedience. Verse 24 was categorized one way (DIR—directed by God) and the other verses differently (BEX—example).
- b. The account of Legion in the Gospels has to do with evil spirits in a possessed man being sent from him into swine. Those verses were categorized as BEX, but they just as easily could have been categorized as DIR.
- c. The verses in Joel were categorized as BEX, but, due to 2:25, could have been categorized as DIR.
- d. Psalms 23:1 and 80:1 are excellent examples of categorization difficulties and the need not to be too exclusive in thinking about application. Strictly speaking, a shepherd is not an animal and therefore OTH, but the application here is BEX.

Use Categories: Codes and Explanations

BEX The animal’s natural or normal behavior or character (what it represents) is used as an example, analogy, metaphor, likeness, resemblance, comparison, image, similitude, illustration, or to teach a lesson, make a point, or to be used as an object lesson.

Example: The parables

Example: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field” (Genesis 3:1, NASB).

Example: “He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter” (2 Peter 2:6, NASB; non-animal example).

DIR The animal was directed or controlled by God to accomplish a given task.

Example: Balaam and his donkey (ass) (Numbers 22)

Example: “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah...” (Jonah 1:17).

Example: “So the Lord appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah” (Jonah 4:6, NASB; God here uses a plant instead of an animal).

Example: “But God appointed a worm” (Jonah 4:7, NASB).

Example: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth that it may become gnats [lice]...’” (Exodus 8:16, NASB).

Example: “And I will send hornets” (Exodus 23:28, NASB).

FCT Just a statement of fact was made about the animal—no particular use at that point.

Example: “And Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock” (Genesis 4:4, NASB).

OTH These are not actual animals, but their name is associated with a non-animal object, such as, *fisherman, fish hook, horseback, etc.*

Example: “And in the same region there were shepherds” (Luke 2:8, NASB).

UCL This includes animals used in the following contexts:

1. Clean/unclean and do/do not touch
2. Sacrifices, worship, and ceremonial rules
3. Levitical laws
4. Rules for priests

Example: “Then Moses called for all the leaders of Israel, and said to them, ‘Go take for yourselves lambs according to your families, and slay the Passover lamb’” (Exodus 12:21, NASB).

Use Categories: Analysis

The contents of the verses containing one or more animal names were then examined along with their

contexts to determine the purpose for the animal(s) being mentioned. That information was then used to assign a “Use Category” for each verse listed in Appendix D in the Supplemental Material (see Table 3 for an overall summary of the categories). That file was then considered as the basic database from which the various analyses and reports for this study were derived.

How the Animals Are Used

As stated in the introduction, the primary emphasis of this study was to determine how the animals and their names are used in the Lord’s written message to mankind. That information is provided in four formats in Appendices in the Supplemental Material:

1. “Appendix C: Full Summary of Uses”—The animal names are in alphabetical order, and each name includes a list of verses in which the name appears and a description of the content of the verse(s). The distribution of use categories is also given, plus the highlights of usage.
2. “Appendix B: Short Summary of Uses”—Appendix B is an abbreviated form of Appendix C. The verses in which each name appears are not presented, nor the contents, but the distribution of use categories and the highlights of usage are.
3. “Appendix I: Names by Book with Notes on Use”—This list is in Bible book, chapter, and verse order. All of the animal names in each reference are given along with notes as to the contents of the verse(s).
4. While all of God’s Word is important, an argument can be made that of the five usage categories, the verses in the BEX (example) and DIR (directed) categories provide the most practical and immediate help for the believer on a daily basis. Therefore, it is my recommendation as you study the data to pay particular attention to these two categories.

At this point, it is appropriate to repeat a word of caution presented earlier: that is, the reader’s theological position may have an impact upon both how a specific verse should be categorized and its meaning and/or application.

What Is Next?

Since the vast bulk of data collected for this study is to be found in the appendices, the reader is encouraged to “dive in” deeply and explore. The body of the paper can be considered as just a start in understanding the importance of the animals for understanding the Creator’s message to mankind. The Excel files allow additional analyses and reports to be generated, and further examination of the related biblical texts may produce even more beneficial results.

Table 3. Approximate percentage of all verses containing animal names in each category

BEX	DIR	FCT	OTH	UCL
52%	5%	15%	7%	21%

Conclusion

The Creator's written revelation to mankind (humanity's "user manual") informs us who He is, what His creative acts have produced, who mankind is, and how mankind is to live. This study examines the relationship between that written record and two products of the Creation (mankind and animals). The following questions were posed:

1. What was God's purpose for even mentioning animals?
2. What role do the animals play in the Creator's message to mankind?

This study has demonstrated that animals are a vital element in God's purpose of providing the Bible for humanity's use. The roles played by animals, that is, how they are used in teaching who He is, who man is, and how man is to live, are many. A general way to understand animals' roles within Scripture is to group the various uses of animals into one of five categories: BEX (example), DIR (directed by God), FCT (fact of life), OTH (non-animal object with an animal name), and UCL (animal use in OT laws). A specific way to understand animals' roles within Scripture is to further examine each individual use in context.

To stress the importance and necessity of the Creator's written message (including its teachings on animals and man), consider the following question: What would life really be like if the Lord had not provided the Bible?

Reference

Strong, James. 2007. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Updated ed. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.

Supplemental Materials—Appendices

Note: (XL) indicates an Excel file; all other documents are PDF files.

Appendix A:

Animal Names in the Bible with Explanations

Each name is listed in alphabetical order followed by additional information, such as names used in other translations; whether the name appears only in the OT, NT, or both; the reference when it appears only once; and other various bits of useful data.

Appendix B:

Short Summary of Uses in Name Order (XL)

This is the same as Appendix C minus the listing of verses.

Appendix C:

Full Summary of Uses in Name Order (XL)

Each animal name is listed in alphabetical order as translated in the KJV. Names used in some other

translations and pertinent notes concerning the animal name are also given. A breakdown is given showing the percentage of times a name is used in each of the five use categories. A list of all verses containing the name, an explanation of the contents of each verse, and its use category is presented. A conclusion is then given highlighting the use of the name for each use category.

Appendix D:

Master Database of Animal Names in Book Order (XL)

Each verse containing an animal name(s) is listed in book, chapter, and verse order. All of the names for the verse are presented in alphabetical order along with the use category assigned to the verse.

Appendix E:

Bible Animal Names Category Data (XL)

The number of verses in each category for each book is given plus the total. Also presented is the total number of verses in the entire book and the percentage of those which contain an animal name.

Appendix F.1:

Complete List of BEX Verses (XL)

This is a list of each verse categorized BEX in book, chapter, and verse order.

Appendix F.2:

Complete List of DIR Verses (XL)

This is a list of each verse categorized DIR in book, chapter, and verse order.

Appendix F.3:

Complete List of FCT Verses (XL)

This is a list of each verse categorized FCT in book, chapter, and verse order.

Appendix F.4:

Complete List of OTH Verses (XL)

This is a list of each verse categorized OTH in book, chapter, and verse order.

Appendix F.5:

Complete List of UCL Verses (XL)

This is a list of each verse categorized UCL in book, chapter, and verse order.

Appendix G.1:

OT—Number of Verses for Each Animal Name in Each OT Book (XL)

This table lists each animal name in alphabetical order and gives the number of verses containing the name in each OT book, plus totals.

**Appendix G.2:
NT—Number of Verses for Each Animal Name in
Each NT Book (XL)**

This table lists each animal name in alphabetical order and gives the number of verses containing the name in each NT book, plus totals.

**Appendix G.3:
OT and NT—Number of Verses for Each Animal
Name in the OT & NT (XL)**

This table lists each animal name in alphabetical order and gives the number of verses containing the name in each NT and OT book, plus totals.

**Appendix H:
Special Count of All Occurrences of Each Animal
Name (XL)**

This table indicates the number of all occurrences of each animal name in the OT and NT. This is not a count of verses, so if a name occurs more than once in a verse, each occurrence is counted. This is the only place in this study that counts occurrences rather than verses.

**Appendix I:
Names Listed by Book with Notes on Use**

This list begins with Genesis 1 and lists all of the animal names and their verses in that chapter and a category designation. That is followed by a description of contents and use. The list continues on to the end of Revelation.

**Appendix J:
Various Statistical Data**

This is a collection of miscellaneous counts related to this study.