

Should English Bibles Include the Word *Dinosaur*? A Deeper Look at Key Terms Reveals That Biblical “Dragons” Were Not Dinosaurs

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Abstract

Dinosaurs and dragons continue to fascinate people around the world. Biblical creationists often discuss these creatures, primarily due to their relevance to the origins debate. Dinosaurs were land animals created on the sixth day, but the Bible never uses this term. Many creationists have highlighted the fact that some older Bibles mention dragons in the Old Testament and cite these as possible or even probable candidates for dinosaurs. However, a careful study of the Hebrew terms translated as “dragon” in these Bibles reveals that the creatures being described should not be thought of as dinosaurs. This paper will examine תַּנִּין (*tannin*), תַּנִּינִים (*tanninim*), תַּנִּים (*tannim*), and other related terms and demonstrate that the Bible is not describing dinosaurs in these instances. *Tannin* and its plural *tanninim* refer to serpents or serpentine creatures while *tannim* is the proper word for jackals or similar wild dogs. Four objections to this premise will also be addressed. While this paper affirms that dinosaurs and man lived at the same time, many biblical creationists will need to rethink how they address the issue of dinosaurs and the Bible.

Keywords: Dinosaur, dragon, *tannin*, *tannim*, *tanninim*, *tan*, jackal, serpent, sea monster, biblical languages, Hebrew, translation.

Introduction

Biblical creationists frequently encounter questions concerning why English Bibles do not include the word dinosaur. In response, many creationists have pointed to the Hebrew word *tannin*, which has been translated as “dragon” in some older Bible translations, and they make the case that this word might refer to dinosaurs. The goal of this article is to examine the meaning of *tannin* and a similar-looking Hebrew term that has been conflated with it to determine whether identifying these terms with dinosaurs is a sound approach. Along the way, the article will address a couple of common misconceptions about this subject and provide a better answer to the question about why the word dinosaur does not appear in our Bibles.

Dinosaurs in the Bible?

Biblical creationists have often pointed to the Behemoth described in Job 40:15–24 as being a strong candidate for a creature that we identify as a dinosaur today. The passage describes a large beast with bones as strong as iron and a tail that is compared to a cedar. While we cannot say with complete certainty that God is describing a dinosaur, the description seems to be consistent with that of a sauropod dinosaur, a group of creatures that includes the *Apatosaurus* and *Brachiosaurus*.

If we are correct that this chapter describes a dinosaur, it still would not mean that translators should have used this term. After all, this passage describes a particular creature, not a broad

category that includes creatures as small as the *Compsognathus*, as large as an *Argentinosaurus*, or as strange as a *Stegosaurus* or *Ankylosaurus*. By comparison, in Job 39:19–25, God asks Job about the horse (“Do you give the horse his might?”) and describes many of its attributes, but God did not ask, “Do you give the mammal his might?” because he was describing a particular animal that belongs in the mammal category.

In the following chapter, we are told about the Leviathan. This creature may be more difficult to identify and has often been dismissed from the possibility of being a dinosaur since dinosaurs were land animals and the text places Leviathan in the water. For that reason, many creationists believe it was a type of marine reptile like a *Mosasaurus* or *Kronosaurus*. However, this creature apparently moved about on land as well. It could raise itself up (verse 25). The weapons mentioned that cannot harm it are generally used on land (verses 26–29), and it leaves marks in the mud (verse 30). The description of it breathing fire (Job 41:18–21) also seems to indicate that it could move on land since breathing fire in the water makes little sense. Even if Leviathan were a dinosaur, it would not be the best approach to translate the word as *dinosaur* for the same reason given above. Leviathan was a specific creature instead of a broad group of animals.

What Is a *Tannin*?

The meaning of the Hebrew noun *tannin* (תַּנִּין) has

been at the forefront of a great deal of confusion regarding the possibility of the Bible mentioning dinosaurs. The term appears nine times in the Bible, and its masculine plural form, *tanninim* (תַּנִּינִים), appears five times. The King James Version translated the singular form as serpent (Exodus 7:9–10), dragon (Nehemiah 2:13; Psalm 91:13), and whale (Job 7:12). Similarly, the same Bible translates the plural form as serpents (Exodus 7:12), dragons (Deuteronomy 32:33), and whales (Genesis 1:21). Other English Bibles from that era, such as the Geneva, Tyndale, and Douay-Rheims translations,¹ translate *tannin* in much the same way. If the same word has been translated to refer to such very different creatures, it is no wonder people are confused about its meaning.

Adding to the confusion is the supposition of some biblical creationists that the word is rightly translated as “dragon” and that we should understand this as possibly referring to a dinosaur. For example, in his study note on Nehemiah 2:13, Henry Morris (1995, 747) wrote, “Some modern versions, with no real justification, translate this as ‘jackal well.’ The Hebrew word, however, means ‘dragon,’ or at least some kind of monster. Most likely it refers to dinosaurs which survived into historic times and gave rise to the worldwide legends of dragons.”² Morris is correct that some modern translations wrongly translate it as “jackal well.”³ However, with all due respect to Morris, this article will demonstrate that *tannin* is much more naturally understood as referring to a serpent or serpentine creature rather than a dragon or dinosaur.

The note from Morris raises a third reason for the confusion over the meaning of *tannin*: There is a Hebrew word that looks very similar to it and has mistakenly been conflated with it. The reason that some translations have “jackal well” is that they have confused *tannin* with *tannim* (תַּנִּים). Morris (1984, 352) incorrectly linked these terms when he wrote the following:

Unfortunately, because of the reluctance of modern translators to commit the Scriptures to teaching the existence of something they regard as purely mythical,

modern versions commonly translate *tannim* by “jackals” or “serpents” or “sea monsters,” depending on the context in each passage. But how can the same Hebrew word carry such a wide, even contradictory, diversity of meanings? The very idea is a striking testimony to the rationalism of modern translators, who are so committed to the uniformitarian view of earth history that they miss the obvious fact that the *tannim* were simply extinct animals, known in earlier periods of human history but now preserved only (or mainly) in the fossil record.

As a matter of fact, if one will simply translate *tannim* by “dinosaurs,” every one of the more than twenty-five uses of the word becomes perfectly clear and appropriate.⁴

Even if modern translators are reluctant to consider dinosaurs as being in the mind of the biblical writers, that is not the reason for their translations here. As his claim that the word appears more than 25 times in Scripture demonstrates, Morris did not recognize the distinction between *tannin* and *tannim*. If he did, he would have realized that *tannim* only appears 14 times. *Tannin* shows up nine times and its plural appears five times. It seems that he added these together to come up with his total. The claim that *tannim* should always be translated as “dinosaurs” is also inaccurate. In fact, it would never be appropriate to translate it as “dinosaurs” because that group of creatures is not within the range of meaning for *tannim*. Echoing this common creationist claim about these terms referring to the same creature(s), Carl Wieland (1993, 24–37) made the following statement:

“Dinosaur” isn’t in the King James Bible—the word hadn’t been invented then. The Hebrew word—*tannin* or *tannim*—is translated 21 times as “dragon(s)” in the Authorized OT, mostly in reference to then-living animals. Three times it is rendered “serpent(s),” twice “whale(s)” and once as “sea-monsters.” The classification is probably much wider than the dinosauria [*sic*], and may include creatures living today. The Hebrew appears to have a “monster” connotation, making the AV rendering

¹ The Geneva Bible was completed in 1560. Tyndale did not complete a translation of the Old Testament prior to being executed in 1536, so we can only compare how he translated these words in the Pentateuch. The Douay-Rheims translation of the Old Testament published in two parts in 1609 and 1610 is a Roman Catholic translation that includes the writings known as the Apocrypha. Notably, the Douay-Rheims used the Latin Vulgate as the primary source instead of Hebrew manuscripts.

² Morris (1995, 747) proceeded to speculate about why the well may have been called this, when he wrote, “The dragon well was known as such by the Jebusites who inhabited the region long before its conquest by Israel. Quite possibly the well was given its name by the first inhabitants who migrated there after the dispersion from Babel, when dinosaurs frequented the spring.”

³ Of the dozens of translations that were checked, only those within the New International Version family of translations used this wording: NIV1984, NIV 2011, Today’s New International Version, and the New International Reader’s Version.

⁴ Morris made this same conflation in his note on Job 30:29, which states in the KJV, “I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls.” Concerning this verse, Morris wrote (1995, 811), “Modern translations commonly render this as ‘brother to jackals.’ However, the Hebrew word is *tannin* and really means ‘dragons.’ These doleful creatures, coming in various species and sizes, had not yet become extinct in Job’s time, and were probably equivalent to the extinct animals we now call dinosaurs.” The problem here is that the Hebrew word is not *tannin*; it is *tannim*, so the modern translations are correct in using “jackals” in Job 30:29. Morris conflated these two terms in the same way that the NIV translators did in Nehemiah 2:13.

“whales” in Genesis 1:21 a legitimate one. Some versions occasionally translate it as “jackals.”⁵

As pointed out above, while it is true that the term *dinosaur* had not been invented prior to the translation of the King James Bible, that point is largely irrelevant since the Bible never uses a term that is equivalent to a group of animals known as dinosaurs today. Wieland seems to acknowledge this fact when stating that the classification for *tannin* probably goes beyond that of Dinosauria. However, as will be shown below, it is more likely that *tannin* is far narrower than Dinosauria.

Tannin and Tannim Are Different Creatures

The larger problem with this quotation is the conflation of *tannin* and *tannim*, two words that look similar but have very different meanings. In his entry on the singular form of *tannim* (תַּנִּין, *tan*), Old Testament scholar Nobuyoshi Kiuchi (1997, *NIDOTTE* 4:311) stated, “The form תַּנִּין [*tannim*] is not to be confused with תַּנִּין [*tannin*].” A close look at the forms of these words and the respective contexts in which they are used strongly supports Kiuchi’s statement.

Tannim appears 14 times and has been translated in the King James Version as “dragons” (13 times, such as in Job 30:29) and “whale” (1 time, Ezekiel 32:2). Notice the inconsistency between plural and singular terms here. This is an important key to solving our dilemma. *Tannin* is a *singular* noun, and its masculine plural form, *tanninim*, is used with plural verbs. As we will see, this term refers to serpentine creatures. Meanwhile, *tannim* is a *plural* noun used with plural verbs, and it should not be translated as “dragons” because it refers to jackals or some other wild dogs that roam wilderness areas.

To demonstrate these points, we need to look at every instance of these three terms in Scripture. This process will spur a handful of objections that will be addressed near the end of the article. First, let’s look at every use of *tannin* and its masculine plural form, *tanninim* (table 1).

Poetic Parallelism

A well-attested principle in hermeneutics is that we should use clear passages to help us understand unclear passages. In the case of *tannin* and *tanninim*,

Table 1. Every use of *tannin* and its masculine plural form, *tanninim*, in Scripture.

Biblical Reference	English Translation (ESV)
Genesis 1:21	So God created the great sea creatures [<i>tanninim</i>] and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.
Exodus 7:9	“When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Prove yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent [<i>tannin</i>].’”
Exodus 7:10	So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent [<i>tannin</i>].
Exodus 7:12	For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents [<i>tanninim</i>]. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.
Deuteronomy 32:33	Their wine is the poison of serpents [<i>tanninim</i>] and the cruel venom of asps.
Nehemiah 2:13	I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon [<i>tannin</i>] Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.
Job 7:12	Am I the sea, or a sea monster [<i>tannin</i>], that you set a guard over me?
Psalms 74:13	You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters [<i>tanninim</i>] on the waters.
Psalms 91:13	You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent [<i>tannin</i>] you will trample underfoot.
Psalms 148:7	Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures [<i>tanninim</i>] and all deeps.
Isaiah 27:1	In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon [<i>tannin</i>] that is in the sea.
Isaiah 51:9	Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon [<i>tannin</i>]?
Jeremiah 51:34	Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me; he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel; he has swallowed me like a monster [<i>tannin</i>].
Lamentations 4:3*	Even jackals [<i>tannin</i>] offer the breast; they nurse their young; but the daughter of my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness.

* This verse requires special attention and will be examined below.

⁵ This quotation seems to rely upon the *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon* (Strong 1995, תַּנִּין), which states that the “AV translates as ‘dragon’ 21 times, ‘serpent’ three times, ‘whale’ three times, and ‘sea monster’ once.” If Wieland was relying on Strong (1995), he misquoted it regarding the number of times the word is translated as “whale” (two instead of three). Even if Wieland was not relying on Strong, a crucial point must be made here: Christian researchers need to understand that simply citing Strong to define a Hebrew or Greek term is largely inadequate. Most of the time, this work simply lists how the AV (Authorized Version, that is, the King James Version) translated the word. While Strong’s work provided an invaluable service to the church in years past, he lived in the nineteenth century, long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient documents that have enhanced our understanding of the ancient biblical languages.

there are a handful of clear passages that can guide our understanding of these terms in other verses. Two of these verses use a common practice of Hebrew poetry called synonymous parallelism. This involves “the repetition of the same thought in two different phrases using two different, yet closely related, sets of words” (Longman 1988). In Deuteronomy 32, the Lord admonishes rebellious Israelites and states the following:

For their vine comes from the vine of Sodom
and from the fields of Gomorrah;
their grapes are grapes of poison;
their clusters are bitter;
Their wine is the poison of serpents [*tanninim*]
and the cruel venom of asps [*pethanim*].
(Deuteronomy 32:32–33)

Notice in the first couplet that “the vine of Sodom” means essentially the same as “the fields of Gomorrah.” In the second couplet, “grapes of poison” is nearly identical to “clusters are bitter.” And in the third couplet, the “poison of serpents” matches the “cruel venom of asps.” Since *tanninim* corresponds to asps (*pethanim*, פֶּתָנִים), we can be confident that this use of *tanninim* refers to certain dangerous snakes. The leading Hebrew-English lexicons define *pethen* as a “venomous serpent... perhaps a viper or cobra” (Clines 1993–2011, 6:811) or a “horned viper” (Koehler et al. 1994–2000, 3:990). We see this same sort of synonymous parallelism with *tannin* in Psalm 91:13:

You will tread on the lion and the adder [*pethen*];
the young lion and the serpent [*tannin*] you will
trample underfoot. (Psalm 91:13)

The lion and adder (*pethen*) of the first line correspond to the young lion and serpent (*tannin*) in the second line. Once again, we see that *tannin* is equated with a type of snake. In this case, even though the ESV translates it as adder, the Hebrew term *pethen* is simply the singular form of the term translated as “asps” in Deuteronomy 32:33.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture

While not an example of synonymous parallelism, there is a passage that will clarify the three uses of *tannin/tanninim* in Exodus 7:9–12. These verses tell of the famous encounter between Moses and Pharaoh where God transformed Aaron’s rod into a *tannin*. We can have a high degree of confidence that this *tannin* was a serpent, as the ESV and most other Bibles translate it. Remember, this miracle mirrors the one that God performed for Moses on Mount Horeb. There the Lord told Moses to throw his staff on the ground, at which point we are told that “it became a serpent” (Exodus 4:3), so it makes sense that Aaron’s staff and the Egyptian magician’s staffs

also became serpents. The word translated as “serpent” in reference to Moses’ staff in Exodus 4 is נָחָשׁ (*nachash*). There is little question that this word refers to a serpent. It appears 31 times in the Old Testament, including five instances in Genesis 3 in reference to the serpent who deceived Eve. In one place, *nachash* is used in parallel with *pethen*, the term defined in the previous paragraph.

They have venom like the venom of a serpent [*nachash*],
like the deaf adder [*pethen*] that stops its ear.
(Psalm 58:4)

We have seen that *pethen*, *nachash*, and *tannin* are used somewhat interchangeably, and all of these terms refer to some type of snake. These clear examples should guide our understanding of how to interpret the other uses of this term that may not be as clear. This would mean that the well in Nehemiah 2:13 should not be understood as “Jackal Well” or “Dragon Well.” Instead, “Serpent Well” is a much more natural rendering of the Hebrew name.

Could *Tannin* have been a Sea Creature?

The issue is not settled yet because we cannot simply conclude that *tannin* only refers to a species of land-dwelling snake when the chart above includes several verses where a *tannin* is described as being in the water, such as Genesis 1:21 and Job 7:12. In light of the description of these creatures on land as serpents, it would seem to follow that the *tanninim* in the water were also serpentine creatures (that is, sea serpents). Indeed, Paul (1997, 4:314) stated, “This generic term refers to great sea creatures in Genesis 1:21 and Psalm 148:7. In Exodus 7 and Psalm 91:13 it refers to a kind of serpent that must be much smaller and may be similar to an adder (cf. also Deuteronomy 32:33).” Since ancient Hebrew animal terminology did not necessarily correspond to modern zoological classifications, a term could potentially be applied to different kinds of creatures that shared a conspicuous characteristic. Thus, *tannin* may have been applied to a variety of creatures that were either elongated or moved in an undulating, serpent-like manner including much larger marine creatures, as demonstrated in Genesis 1:21 where the adjective גָּדוֹל (*gadōl*, “great”) is used to describe some *tanninim*.⁶ This adjective is not included in Psalm 148:7, so the Hebrew text itself does not describe the *tanninim* in that verse as “great.”

Two of the examples from the chart above seem to support the idea that *tannin* were serpentine creatures.

You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the sea monsters [*tanninim*]
on the waters.

⁶ Selbie states that *tannin* is supposedly derived “from an (unused) root תַּנַּן = ‘stretch,’ ‘extend,’ and so [it signifies] an elongated animal” (Selbie 1912, 427).

You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. (Psalm 74:13–14)

In verse 13, *tanninim* is clearly used for creatures in the sea, and it seems to parallel Leviathan in the following verse. Leviathan is also identified as a *tannin* in the water in Isaiah.

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent [*nachash*], Leviathan the twisting serpent [*nachash*], and he will slay the dragon [*tannin*] that is in the sea. (Isaiah 27:1)

Both of these passages describe Leviathan as a *tannin* in the water, and the ESV even identifies Leviathan as a dragon, but this translation may give the wrong impression. Again, this *tannin* is twice identified as a *nachash*, the general term for serpent. Furthermore, even if *dragon* is an appropriate translation, it would be in reference to a marine creature (or predominantly marine), so it would probably not be something that we identify as a dinosaur.

There are other details that should cause us to refrain from using these verses as evidence that Isaiah and the psalmist were referring to a dinosaur or dinosaur-like creature. A few clues in these verses may indicate these two instances of Leviathan are not necessarily meant to refer to an actual animal. Does Leviathan have multiple heads, as Psalm 74:14 implies? Did God already crush this sea creature and give its body as food for animals in the wilderness? Also, why would God need to kill Leviathan with a sword in the “day of the LORD,” a time that may still be future from our perspective but was certainly in the future in Isaiah’s time? Those of us who believe in biblical inerrancy would not view these two verses as being contradictory (God already killed the creature in Psalm 74 or he will do it in the future, at least from Isaiah’s perspective). The solution seems to be that these passages are using Leviathan in a symbolic manner to stand for something other than a literal sea creature. This notion is further supported by the Ugaritic texts dated approximately 400–500 years prior to Isaiah. In one passage that is part of the *Baal Cycle*, it mentions a creature named Litan (or Lotan), and the following words are spoken about Baal: “When you killed Litan, the Fleeing Serpent, finished off the Twisting Serpent, the seven-headed monster...” (quoted in Coogan and Smith 2012, 139–140). These exact words are repeated later in the same column. The name “Litan” is from the Ugaritic

noun *ltn*. Closely related to Hebrew, as both are classified as Northwest Semitic languages, Ugaritic was also a consonantal language. The Hebrew term for Leviathan uses these same consonants but adds *vav* and *yod*. This might be passed off as coincidence if these two Ugaritic verses were not practically identical to the Hebrew text of Isaiah 27:1. Both Litan and Leviathan are described as the fleeing serpent and the twisting serpent destroyed by Baal and Yahweh in Ugaritic and Hebrew, respectively. Thus, it seems as though these biblical passages are used as a polemic against Baal worshippers—Baal is not the true God who subdues dark forces—YHWH is the almighty God of creation.⁷ If this brief comparison between Litan and Leviathan is accurate, it does not follow that Leviathan in Job 41 should be understood in a metaphorical way as some scholars suggest.

To summarize the various uses of *tannin* and *tanninim*, we have several passages that clearly identify these creatures as serpents. In fact, if you were to insert serpent for *tannin* and serpents for *tanninim*, the passages would make sense, apart from Lamentations 4:3, which will be addressed in the objections section below.

What Are *Tannim*?

It has already been stated that *tannim* is a plural noun that refers to jackals or some other wild dogs that roam the wilderness. Before defending that claim, we need to look at every use of *tannim* in Scripture.

The first thing to notice in table 2 is that every use of *tannim*, except for the two in Ezekiel, is translated in the plural form. The final verse in the list provides the clue that we need to make this determination. Notice that the Hebrew term there is תַּנִּינֹת (*tannōt*). The *-ōt* ending of a Hebrew noun signifies that the word is a feminine plural. The *-im* ending of *tannim* signifies that it is a masculine plural. This means that the singular form of these *tannōt* and *tannim* is *tan*. According to leading lexicons, this word means “jackal” (Clines 1993–2011, 8:650).⁸

The contexts in many of these passages make perfect sense if jackals are in view. In Isaiah 13:22, the term is used in parallel with hyenas. While these are different types of animals, they are similar enough, particularly in their behavior, to use in parallel. However, serpents are far different than hyenas, so this passage would make little sense if we tried to force the meaning of *tannin* onto *tannim*.

⁷ In reference to Isaiah 27:1, Lipiński stated that “Leviathan personifies evil powers that will be destroyed on the day of Yahweh.” Concerning Psalm 74:13–14, he explained that these verses allude “to the primordial battle between Yahweh and the monster personifying the waters of chaos” (1995, 9:506). If Lipiński is correct in his assessment of Psalm 74:13–14, it would mean the psalmist was using Leviathan as part of a polemic against surrounding pagan beliefs that saw the work of creation as involving the conquering of the sea and chaos. Thus, the psalmist would essentially be stating that Yahweh—not Baal—is the true God, the Creator who made all things.

⁸ See also Koehler et al. 1994–2000, 4:1759, and Kiuchi, 1997, 4:310–311.

Table 2. Every use of *tannim* in Scripture.

Biblical Reference	English Translation (ESV)
Job 30:29	I am a brother of jackals (<i>tannim</i>) and a companion of ostriches.
Psalms 44:19	Yet you have broken us in the place of jackals [<i>tannim</i>] and covered us with the shadow of death.
Isaiah 13:22	Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals [<i>tannim</i>] in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.
Isaiah 34:13	Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals [<i>tannim</i>], an abode for ostriches.
Isaiah 35:7	The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals [<i>tannim</i>], where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
Isaiah 43:20	The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals [<i>tannim</i>] and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people.
Jeremiah 9:11	"I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals [<i>tannim</i>], and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant."
Jeremiah 10:22	A voice, a rumor! Behold, it comes!—a great commotion out of the north country to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals [<i>tannim</i>].
Jeremiah 14:6	The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights; they pant for air like jackals [<i>tannim</i>]; their eyes fail because there is no vegetation.
Jeremiah 49:33	Hazor shall become a haunt of jackals [<i>tannim</i>], an everlasting waste; no man shall dwell there; no man shall sojourn in her.
Jeremiah 51:37	And Babylon shall become a heap of ruins, the haunt of jackals [<i>tannim</i>], a horror and a hissing, without inhabitant.
Ezekiel 29:3*	Thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon [<i>tannim</i>] that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, 'My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.'"
Ezekiel 32:2*	"Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him: 'You consider yourself a lion of the nations, but you are like a dragon [<i>tannim</i>] in the seas; you burst forth in your rivers, trouble the waters with your feet, and foul their rivers.'"
Micah 1:8	For this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals [<i>tannim</i>], and mourning like the ostriches.
Malachi 1:3	"But Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals [<i>tannōf</i>] of the desert."

* These verses require special attention and will be examined below.

Tannim are frequently mentioned as a picture of judgment on a city or nation, and since jackals have often been observed to roam abandoned places, this supports the definition of *tannim* as jackals. For example, in reference to Edom (possibly representing other surrounding nations as well), God said, "It shall become a habitation of jackals [*tannim*]" (Isaiah 34:13). The same phrase or similar wording depicting desolation is used in Isaiah 35:7; Jeremiah 9:11, 10:22, 49:33, and 51:37. With the exception of two verses in Ezekiel (discussed in the objections section below), each occurrence of *tannim* makes it clear that land animals are in view. For example, Jeremiah 14:6 describes *tannim* sniffing the wind. Many other passages place them in the same context as ostriches (for example, Job 30:29; Isaiah 34:13; Micah 1:8), thus identifying *tannim* as land animals.

In Jeremiah 51, both *tannin* and *tannim* are used in close proximity, and the difference between the two creatures being described is readily apparent. The prophet vividly described Babylon's cruelty toward Jerusalem by writing, "Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me; he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel; he has swallowed me like a monster [*tannin*]; he has filled his stomach with my

delicacies; he has rinsed me out" (Jeremiah 51:34). Just a few verses later, he wrote, "And Babylon shall become a heap of ruins, the haunt of jackals [*tannim*], a horror and a hissing, without inhabitant" (Jeremiah 51:37). The *tannin* (verse 34) here seems to refer to a large animal capable of crushing and devouring, which is precisely what snakes do when they swallow their prey whole. It is also what constrictor snakes do when they envelop and crush their prey before devouring it. But this could hardly refer to a jackal. Three verses later, we find a picture of the judgment of desolation being decreed for Babylon, and the *tannim* (jackals) are used to signify such a verdict.

Answering Objections to Distinguishing Between *Tannin* and *Tannim*

Based on previous interactions with people on this topic, there will undoubtedly be some objections raised against the position put forth in this article. The remainder of this article will be used to address four anticipated objections.

Objection #1: These are simply the Aramaic and Hebrew plurals of the same word.

This objection highlights another confusing element

in this discussion. Hebrew and Aramaic are closely related Northwest Semitic languages. In fact, certain portions of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic, and the languages are written with the same letters. One of the differences between the two involves how a plural is made from the singular form. For a masculine plural in Hebrew, an “-im” (ים) suffix is added, while in Aramaic an “-in” (ין) ending is added.

The objection proposes that since *tannin* and *tannim* appear to have these suffixes, then perhaps they are simply the Aramaic and Hebrew plurals of *tan*, respectively. The problem with this claim is that, in context, *tannin* matches the singular associated verb form, and its masculine plural (*tanninim*) is used five times in the Old Testament (Genesis 1:21; Exodus 7:12; Deuteronomy 32:33; Psalm 74:13 and 148:7). Even in English Bibles, this distinction is clear from the contexts in which *tannin* is used. So *tannin* is not an Aramaic plural of *tan*.⁹ It is a Hebrew singular noun that referred to a serpent.

Objection #2: Two verses clearly use tannim to refer to a water creature.

In Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2, *tannim* has been translated as a water creature, perhaps a crocodile.¹⁰ This argument could show that there are two exceptions to the idea put forth in this article that *tannin* and *tannim* describe two completely different animals. However, there are strong reasons to think that the Hebrew word in both passages was originally *tannin*.

The top Hebrew lexicons place these two occurrences in Ezekiel under *tannin* rather than *tannim*, indicating that the scholars behind these works believed that the text originally referred to a *tannin*. In its entry for *tannin*, the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon states that it is erroneously used as *tannim* in Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2 “by confusion with” the plural of *tan*, which would be *tannim* (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1906, 1072). *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* lists the appearances of this word in these two verses under *tannin* (Clines 1993–2011, 8:654). The *Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* places these two verses under its entry for *tan*, although it acknowledges that this is conjectural

and cites Zimmerli to propose that in these two instances *tannim* is “a by-form” of *tannin* (Koehler et al. 1994–2000, 4:1759).

In his commentary on Ezekiel, Old Testament scholar Walther Zimmerli (1983, 106) stated that *tannim* in Ezekiel 29:3 “can on no account be the plural of תן [*tan*] ‘jackal,’” but it should instead “be equated with תן [*tannin*].”¹¹ Two of the reasons so many scholars are confident that this word should be *tannin* is that the verb in this sentence, רֹבֵטִים (*rōbets*), is singular, so it does not match the plural noun *tannim*, and everywhere else, *tannim* is used in reference to a land animal, whereas the creature described in Ezekiel is in the water.

The NET Bible includes a translator’s note for Ezekiel 29:3 stating, “*Heb[rew]* ‘jackals,’ but many medieval Hebrew manuscripts read correctly ‘the serpent.’” (Biblical Studies Press 2005, Ezekiel 29:3 no. 4). In other words, several Hebrew manuscripts existed in the medieval period that used the word *tannin* rather than *tannim*. The note goes on to add, “Because of the Egyptian setting of this prophecy and the reference to the creature’s scales (verse 4), many understand a crocodile to be the referent here.”

Finally, the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek version of the Old Testament, uses the word δράκοντα (*drakonta*), which is the accusative form of δράκων (*drakōn*), in Ezekiel 29:3 and δράκωνκων (*drakōn*) in Ezekiel 32:2. Those without a knowledge of Greek can probably guess that these are words for “dragon” in Greek. So the translators of the LXX may have had a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures that had *tannin* rather than *tannim* in these two verses.¹²

In light of these details, it is quite plausible that Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2 originally read *tannin*, although *tannim* may instead represent a by-form of *tannin* in these passages. Even if the appearance of *tannim* in these verses was used as another form of *tannin*, as described by Zimmerli, these uses cannot be used to reinterpret the consistent use of *tannin* (serpent) and *tannim* (jackals) elsewhere.

Objection #3: Tannin is used in Lamentations 4:3 to refer to a mammal, not a serpent.

Lamentations 4:3 states, “Even jackals offer the

⁹ The third objection addressed in this article will show that one use of *tannin* may be from Aramaic.

¹⁰ Cooper (1994, 273) argued that “the ‘monster’ was doubtless a crocodile. The ‘hooks’ in the jaws to render the ‘monster’ helpless described the standard method for capture and destruction of a crocodile.”

¹¹ Zimmerli’s full entry is technical but informative. He wrote, “תַּנִּים [*tannim*] here can on no account be the plural of תָּן [*tan*] ‘jackal’ (Isaiah 13:22; 34:13; and elsewhere), but is to be equated with תַּנִּין [*tannin*] (‘sea monster’ Genesis 1:31; ‘serpent’ Exodus 7:9f; ‘dragon’ Jeremiah 51:34). Thus some MSS (Ginsburg) read תַּנִּין [*tannin*] here too. Since, however, the form תַּנִּים [*tannim*] occurs with the same meaning in 32:2 (2 MSS^{Kon} read תַּנִּין [*tannin*] there too), it must be asked whether one has not to reckon with a parallel form תַּנִּים [*tannim*] alongside תַּנִּין [*tannin*]. Here the word must mean the ‘crocodile,’ the typical Egyptian Nile animal” (1983, 106).

¹² It is also possible that the LXX translators simply believed that in a minority of occurrences, *tannim* should be translated as “dragons.” They chose to translate it this way in Jeremiah 9:11 and Micah 1:8. It is unclear why the translators would have chosen this term in these verses. Both refer to places that had been or would be destroyed and laid waste, so “jackals” makes far more contextual sense, as demonstrated in the following point.

breast; they nurse their young; but the daughter of my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness.” This objection is like the previous one because it appears to provide a counterexample to the position proposed in this article. That is, since the English is rendered as “jackals,” then we should expect the Hebrew word to be *tannim*, but it is *tannin*. However, there are several reasons why this passage should be understood to be describing jackals rather than some type of serpent.

Tannin does not fit the grammar of the sentence for a couple of reasons. First, *tannin* is singular, but the pronoun (they) that refers to this word is plural. Thus, we should expect the noun to be plural, like *tannim*. Similarly, the verb in this sentence is plural, so a singular noun just does not work.

The context of this passage provides another clue that this word should be “jackals” (*tannim*). In nearly half of the uses of *tannim* in Scripture, it is used in connection with “ostriches,” just as in this verse.¹³ Yet *tannin* is not found elsewhere in connection with ostriches.

The *Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler et al. 1994–2000, 4:1759) suggests that the use of *tannin* in Lamentations 4:3 could be a use of *tan* with an Aramaic masculine plural ending (-in).¹⁴ If this is accurate, then the sentence would have agreement between subject, verb, and pronoun. Without access to the autograph of Lamentations, one can only speculate on this point, but it is not uncommon to find loan words from other languages in the biblical text.

While we do not possess the autograph or even the earliest copies, we do have some notes of the people who copied the Hebrew texts used for the translation of the Old Testament. The Masoretes were responsible for copying and preserving the Masoretic text, and they are also the scribes who inserted vowel marks into the text sometime between the sixth and tenth centuries AD. While copying the texts, the Masoretes took extreme care to faithfully copy the manuscripts. They refused to make any changes, but

they wrote notes in the margins to explain difficulties they encountered. They also included what is tantamount to a pronunciation guide, called the *Qere* (from the Aramaic word meaning “to be read”). In Lamentations 4:3, the *Qere* states that it should be read as *tannim* (Koehler et al. 1994–2000, 4:1759). So the Masoretic scribes copying the Old Testament believed that *tannim* was the proper word here, but they refused to alter any letter of the text.

While we do not possess conclusive manuscript evidence to reach a decisive conclusion on this point, it is clear *tannin* understood as the ordinary Hebrew singular “serpent” does not fit the context or grammar of the sentence. Furthermore, the statement does not really make any sense with *tannin*, since to the best of our knowledge, serpents did not nurse their young. Technically, the text says that these creatures “offer the breast,” so even though this is an idiomatic way to describe breastfeeding, the creatures obviously had breasts they could bare to nourish their young. Therefore, we do not need to speculate on how serpents or dragons could suckle their offspring because the text refers to mammals, like jackals, that nurse their young.

Objection #4: The LXX uses a word for “dragon” to translate tannin, and this seems more like a dinosaur instead of a serpent.

The LXX indeed translates *tannin* as δράκων (dragon) in most instances, except Nehemiah 2:13, where it is translated as “figs,” and Isaiah 51:9, where it is left untranslated.¹⁵ The plural form (*tanninim*) is translated as δράκοντες (dragons) in four of five instances, the lone exception being Genesis 1:21, where it is translated as κήτη (whales).¹⁶ It also uses *dragon* to translate *nachash* (Job 26:13; Amos 9:3) and *leviathan* (Job 41:1; LXX reference is Job 40:20). It seems like the LXX translators were not quite sure what to do with *tannim*, rendering it variously as terms that can be translated as jackals (Isaiah 34:13), dragons (Jeremiah 9:11), or sparrows (Jeremiah 10:22), and in Jeremiah 14:6, the word is not even translated.¹⁷

¹³ Out of 14 uses of a plural form of *tan*, the word appears with “ostriches” in Job 30:29; Isaiah 13:21–22, 34:13, 43:20; Micah 1:8. If the original text of Lamentations 4:3 had *tannim*, then exactly half of the uses of this word would appear alongside “ostriches.”

¹⁴ A recent paper (Johnson and Jenson 2025) argued that *tannim* primarily refers to crocodiles. Part of their argument appeals to a wetter climate in Israel during the early first millennium BC and the resulting availability of potential crocodile habitat. However, the biblical contexts frequently associate *tannim* with wilderness or desolated places rather than aquatic environments. Jeremiah 14:6 is particularly difficult for the crocodile interpretation since *tannim* are compared to wild donkeys standing on bare heights and panting for air because there is no vegetation.

If this point is accurate, then the use of the masculine plural in reference to female creatures that nursed their young could be an example of a generic masculine noun, where a noun is masculine in form but can be used to refer to both males and females. The English word *guys* often functions this way.

¹⁵ The Greek text’s odd wording in Nehemiah 2:13 apparently resulted from confusion between similar Hebrew words. The LXX reads πηγὴ τῶν συκῶν (“fountain of the figs”) for תַּנְיִן הַיְּדֵן (‘*en hattannin*’, “well of the *tannin*”). Selbie explains that the LXX evidently confused תַּנְיִן (*tannin*) with תְּאֵנִים (*te’anim*, “figs”) (Selbie 1912, 427).

¹⁶ By the time the LXX was translated, Leviathan and other sea serpents were sometimes used as symbols of evil, so the translation of κήτη as “whales” instead of “sea creatures” or “sea serpents” may have been done “to avoid attributing an evil creation to God” (Kiessling 1970, 167–177).

¹⁷ In these passages, the LXX translates *tannim* as σεῖρῆνων (*seirēnōn*) in Isaiah 34:13, δράκόντων (*drakontōn*) in Jeremiah 9:11, and στρουθῶν (*strouthōn*) in Jeremiah 10:22. Jeremiah 14:6 states, “The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights; they pant for air like jackals; their eyes fail because there is no vegetation.” The LXX mentions that these wild donkey pant for air, but it omits the words translated as “like jackals.” The translators may have decided to leave *tannim* untranslated here or perhaps the Hebrew text they used for their translation was lacking the word and its preceding preposition.

At first glance, this appears to be a strong objection since our conception of dragons resembles certain dinosaurs more than snakes, but a careful look at history shows that this was not the case until long after the Bible was written. The notion of dragons having large bodies, legs, and wings comes from the medieval period. During the classical period, the words for serpent (οφίς) and dragon (δράκων) were practically synonymous in Greek. For example, Homer's *Iliad* (1898, 200–209) describes the following scene:

a soaring eagle that flew skirting the left wing of their host, with a monstrous blood-red snake (δράκοντα) in its talons still alive and struggling to escape. The snake was still bent on revenge, wriggling and twisting itself backwards till it struck the bird that held it, on the neck and breast; whereon the bird being in pain, let it fall, dropping it into the middle of the host, and then flew down the wind with a sharp cry. The Trojans were struck with terror when they saw the snake (οφιν), portent of aegis-bearing Zeus, writhing in the midst of them.

The two Greek words called out here, δράκοντα and οφιν, are the terms typically translated as *dragon* and *snake*, respectively. In this passage, the terms are used synonymously since both describe the snake that was picked up and dropped by the eagle. In his *History of Animals*, Aristotle (1991, 222) used the same two terms synonymously when he wrote, “At war are eagle and dragon-snake [δράκων]; for the eagle takes snakes [οφεις] for food.”¹⁸ Regarding classical Greek writing on this subject, Silva (2014, 1:774) stated, “Because serpents evoke fear and play a role in early myths, the word is often rendered ‘dragon’ in the sense of a monstrous serpent (but the ancients Greeks did not visualize it as a winged, fire-blowing creature with claws).”

The New Testament also uses these words to refer to the same creature. In Revelation 12:9, John described his vision where he saw Satan as the great “dragon” (δράκων), and he calls him the ancient “serpent” (ὄφις).

Early Latin texts also tended to treat these creatures as nearly synonymous. For example, in the *Aeneid*, written a couple of decades before Jesus was born, Virgil (Maro 1910, 1007–1011) described a scene of an eagle carrying a snake reminiscent of the passage from the *Iliad* above.

As when a golden eagle high in air
knits to a victim—snake [*draconem*] his clinging feet
and deeply-thrusting claws; but, coiling back,
the wounded serpent [*serpens*] roughens his stiff
scales
and stretches high his hissing head...

The two Latin terms, *draconem* and *serpens*, are used interchangeably and are unmistakably the words that have been translated as “dragon” and “serpent.” In both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the creatures being picked up are clearly snakes instead of large dinosaur-like Medieval dragons. The Roman cavalry of the Late Roman period carried the *draco* standard, and it was designed to look like a snake.

Dragon was sometimes reserved for the largest and fiercest of serpents, and in some places, it was used for mythical symbols of evil. Over the centuries, the concept of a dragon changed, as new features and abilities were added to their descriptions. In the third century AD, descriptions of dragons with crests and beards began showing up. In the following century, dragons were described as having the ability to breathe fire and fly (Senter, Mattox, and Haddad 2016, 67–124).¹⁹ In the early ninth century, the Stuttgart Psalter illustrated dragons that look somewhat similar to modern concepts with four legs, wings, and a long tail.

Since the meaning of “dragon” has changed from large snake to monstrous, flying, fire-breathing creature over the centuries, the fact that the LXX used it to translate *tannin* is consistent with the premise of this paper because a dragon was another term for serpent during the time the LXX was translated.

Conclusion

The Hebrew terms *tannin* and *tannim* have caused no shortage of confusion over the years. This detailed study has sought to provide clarity by showing that these two terms should not be conflated since they refer to different types of animals. A *tannin* is a serpent or a creature that moves in a serpent-like way, while *tanninim* is the plural form of this term. They could be found on both land and in the sea. *Tannim* are wild dogs or jackals. Understanding the distinction between these terms will help us gain a better comprehension of Scripture.

Keeping these things in mind will also enable us to provide a better answer to those who ask why the word *dinosaur* is not found in the Bible. Even though Behemoth may have been a dinosaur and it is possible that some of the dragon legends from around the world may be based on encounters with dinosaurs, it does not follow that we should try to force dinosaurs into the range of meaning for *tannin*. No matter how well-intended our motives might be, we must allow the biblical text to be the authority and do our very best to interpret it carefully. When we do that, we see that it is highly unlikely that the

¹⁸ The Greek text states, “ἔστι δ’ αἰετὸς καὶ δράκων πολέμια τροφήν γὰρ ποιεῖται τοὺς ὄφεις ὁ αἰετὸς.” The words for dragon and serpent are in bold. Notice that the English translation above renders δράκων as “dragon-snake,” but this term is the standard Greek word for dragon.

¹⁹ These authors trace the history of the dragon’s development from a serpent in classical Greek writings to the modern chimeric conception of the beast. Their chart on page 69 provides a helpful summary of when features were added to these creatures.

term *tannin* could refer to a dinosaur, and we can be confident that *tannim* should not be identified as dinosaurs.

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