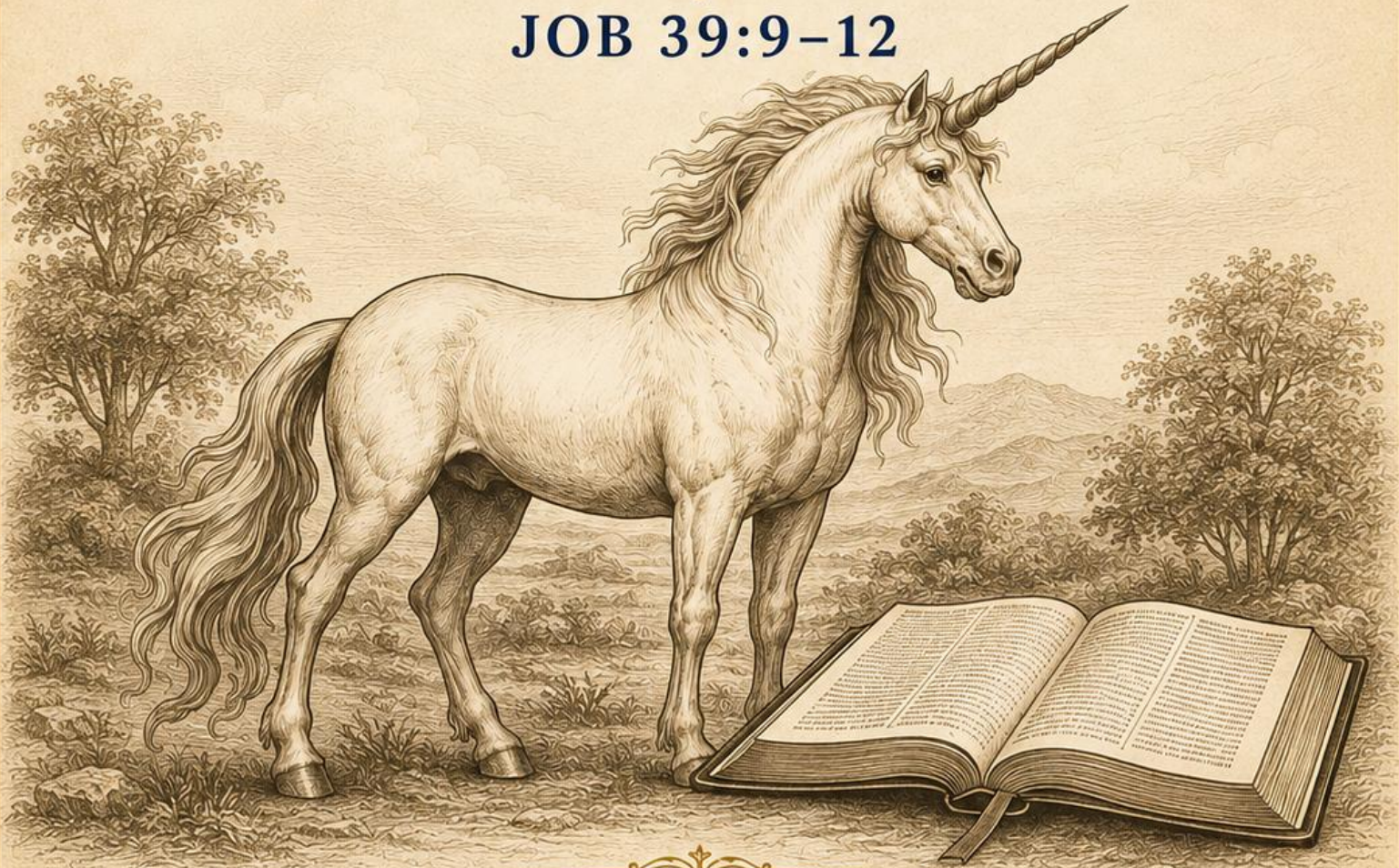




REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

UNICORNS IN THE BIBLE?

JOB 39:9–12



SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY

PASTOR & TEACHER

Aloha, church family.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you have been studying the Bible for many years,
or whether you are just beginning to ask questions,
you are welcome here.

Our invitation is simple:

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

If this is your first time with us,
we would be grateful if you would complete one of our guest cards.

We only ask for your first name and email address.

We will not pressure you,
and we will not fill your mailbox with unwanted messages.

We simply want to thank you for being here
and let you know what is happening at Reason Together Church.

After the service,

I hope you will join us in the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free,
the conversation is welcome,
and there are always free refills on conversations.

At Reason Together Church,
we do not pass an offering plate.

Our guests are encouraged to support their home church.

For those who have made Reason Together Church their church home,
giving information is available online or in your bulletin.

Giving should be an act of worship,
never an act of pressure.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,
thank You for bringing us together today.

Thank You for giving us minds that can ask questions,
hearts that can seek truth

and Your Word to guide us.
Help us approach today's question with humility.
Keep us from dismissing honest questions.
Keep us from making claims that go beyond the evidence.
Help us distinguish between what Your Word says,
what we assume it says
and what other people have told us that it says.
Open our understanding.
Strengthen our confidence in Scripture.
Most of all,
help us see the greatness of the God who stands behind every word.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

I want to begin with a simple request.
I want you to close your eyes for just a moment
and picture a unicorn.
What did you see?
Most of us probably pictured something very similar.
We pictured a beautiful white horse.
We pictured a single spiraling horn growing from its forehead.
Perhaps we pictured a rainbow in the background.
Maybe the unicorn was flying through the clouds.
Some of you may have pictured something from a children's book,
a cartoon,
a movie
or a toy store.
You can open your eyes.
That is what the word "unicorn" means to most people today.
It is a mythical horse-like creature.
It belongs in fairy tales.
It belongs in fantasy stories.
It does not belong in a serious discussion about real animals.
And yet,

if you open a King James Bible,
you will find the word “unicorn” not once,
not twice,
but nine times.

That raises an obvious question.

Does the Bible teach that magical horses with one horn once roamed the earth?

Does the Bible contain fairy-tale animals?

Have skeptics discovered an embarrassing mistake in Scripture?

Or could it be that we are taking the modern meaning of an English word
and forcing it backward into a translation produced more than four hundred years ago?

Today’s question is:

Does the Bible really teach that unicorns existed?

Our primary passage is found in Job 39.

Before we read it,

we need to understand who is speaking.

Job has suffered terribly.

He has lost his children.

He has lost his possessions.

He has lost his health.

He has listened to his friends offer explanations that did not adequately explain his suffering.

Job has asked questions.

He has defended himself.

He has wanted God to answer him.

Then God speaks.

Beginning in Job 38,

God answers Job out of the whirlwind.

But God does not give Job a simple explanation for everything that happened.

Instead,

God asks Job a series of questions about creation.

Where was Job when God laid the foundations of the earth?

Could Job command the morning?

Could Job bind the sweet influences of Pleiades?

Could Job provide food for the raven?

Did Job understand how the mountain goats gave birth?

Could Job control the wild creatures God had made?

Then we come to Job 39:9–12.

Listen carefully to the Word of God:

“Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee,
or abide by thy crib?

Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow?
or will he harrow the valleys after thee?

Wilt thou trust him,
because his strength is great?
or wilt thou leave thy labour to him?

Wilt thou believe him,
that he will bring home thy seed,
and gather it into thy barn?”

That does not sound like a magical horse flying over a rainbow.

God describes a creature that Job knew was powerful.

It possessed enormous strength.

But Job could not domesticate it.

Job could not make it live beside his feeding trough.

Job could not tie it to a plow.

Job could not make it prepare the fields.

Job could not trust it to gather his harvest.

The point was not that the animal was imaginary.

The point was that the animal was beyond Job’s control.

God was asking Job:

Can you control this creature?

Can you make it serve you?

Can you trust it with your harvest?

The implied answer to every question was no.

Job could not control it.

But God could.

That observation gives us our first important conclusion.

Whatever the Biblical unicorn was,

the Bible presents it as a real animal.

It appears in a passage filled with real animals.

God speaks about lions,

ravens,

wild goats,

deer,

wild donkeys,

ostriches,

horses,

hawks

and eagles.

In the middle of that discussion,

God speaks about the animal the KJV calls a unicorn.

Nothing in the passage suggests that God suddenly left the natural world

and introduced a creature from mythology.

Nothing says that it could perform magic.

Nothing says that it could fly.

Nothing says that it resembled a horse.

The Biblical text describes a real,

powerful,

wild

and untamable animal.

The word “unicorn” appears nine times in the King James Version.

Let us look at what those passages tell us.

Numbers 23:22 says:

“God brought them out of Egypt;

he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn.”

Numbers 24:8 repeats the image:

“God brought him forth out of Egypt;

he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn.”

Twice in Numbers,

the animal represents tremendous strength.

Deuteronomy 33:17 says:

“His glory is like the firstling of his bullock,
and his horns are like the horns of unicorns:
with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth:
and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim,
and they are the thousands of Manasseh.”

Here the animal has powerful horns
that can push or gore an opponent.

Job 39 tells us that the creature has great strength
but cannot be trusted to perform the work of a domesticated animal.

Psalm 22:21 says:

“Save me from the lion’s mouth:
for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.”

The horns are dangerous.

Psalm 29:6 says:

“He maketh them also to skip like a calf;
Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.”

The young creature can leap or skip with strength and energy.

Psalm 92:10 says:

“But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn:
I shall be anointed with fresh oil.”

Once again,

the horn represents strength and exaltation.

Finally,

Isaiah 34:7 says:

“And the unicorns shall come down with them,
and the bullocks with the bulls;
and their land shall be soaked with blood,
and their dust made fat with fatness.”

The animal is again associated with powerful horned animals.

When we place all nine references together,
a consistent picture emerges.

This was a strong animal.

It was a wild animal.

It was an untamable animal.

It possessed one or more impressive horns.

It could be dangerous.

It was capable of powerful movement.

It was not something a farmer could casually attach to a plow.

Those are the Biblical facts.

But where is the magical horse?

It is not there.

The magical horse is not in the Hebrew text.

The magical horse is not described in any of these passages.

We brought that picture with us

because that is what the English word “unicorn” means to us today.

This is where we must slow down

and Reason Together.

When we read the Bible in English,

we are reading a translation.

The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew.

The New Testament was written in Greek.

God inspired the words of Scripture in those original languages.

Translators then perform the difficult work of expressing those words in another language.

Every one of the nine KJV references to a unicorn

comes from forms of the same Hebrew word.

That Hebrew word is commonly written in English as re'em.

The difficulty is that no one can point to a living animal today

and prove beyond all doubt:

That is the re'em.

Ancient animal names can be difficult to translate.

Sometimes an animal becomes extinct.

Sometimes its territory changes.

Sometimes different cultures call the same animal by different names.

Sometimes the same name is applied to several similar animals.

And sometimes people know the characteristics of an animal

without leaving us enough information to identify its precise modern species.

That does not mean the animal was imaginary.

If someone found a two-thousand-year-old document containing an unfamiliar name for a bird, our inability to identify that exact species would not prove the bird never existed.

It would only prove that our knowledge is incomplete.

Most modern translations render re'em as "wild ox."

Some have used "wild bull."

Other historical translations have used words associated with a rhinoceros.

The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament frequently used the word monokeros.

That word means "one-horned."

The Latin tradition used words including unicornis
and also forms of rhinoceros.

The English word "unicorn" came from the idea of a one-horned creature.

"Uni" means one.

"Corn" comes from a word meaning horn.

At its most basic level,
the word meant a one-horned animal.

Over the centuries,
however,

the popular picture attached to the word became increasingly specific.

The word came to mean the mythical horse-like creature that we imagine today.

Here is the mistake we must avoid.

We cannot take the picture that comes into our minds today,
carry it backward more than four hundred years
and assume that the KJV translators were using the word in precisely the same way.

The King James Bible did not change.

English changed.

We see evidence of this throughout the KJV.

In 1611,
the word "conversation" could refer to a person's conduct or manner of life,
not merely spoken communication.

The word "prevent" could mean to go before,
not merely to stop something from happening.

The word "suffer" could mean to permit or allow.

The words printed on the page have remained the same,
but the way English speakers ordinarily understand those words has changed.
That is not a defect in the Bible.
That is what living languages do.
Languages change.
Words acquire new meanings.
Old meanings become uncommon.
Images become attached to words that were not always attached to them.
The word “unicorn” presents a particularly vivid example
because its modern picture is so memorable.
There is an important piece of evidence in the original 1611 King James Bible.
At Isaiah 34:7,
where the text reads “unicorns,”
the translators placed an alternative reading in the margin.
The margin said:
“Or, Rhinocerots.”
That note is extremely helpful.
It tells us that the translators were considering the rhinoceros
when they selected or explained the word “unicorn.”
They were not telling readers to picture a magical horse.
They were wrestling with the identity of an ancient horned animal.
The marginal note also teaches us something about the translators themselves.
They were not afraid to acknowledge uncertainty.
They sometimes placed alternative renderings in the margins.
They understood that translating ancient Hebrew and Greek into English required judgment.
They wanted the reader to know when another translation was possible.
We honor their work more faithfully when we share their humility
than when we claim a level of certainty that they did not claim for themselves.
Another piece of evidence comes from Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary.
That dictionary was published more than two hundred years after the KJV,
so it cannot tell us exactly what every reader pictured in 1611.
But it does show that the word still had broader applications than it usually has today.
Webster defined a unicorn as an animal with one horn

and noted that the name was often applied to the rhinoceros.

His entry for rhinoceros distinguished between species having one horn and species having two.

Even today,

the scientific name of the greater one-horned rhinoceros is *Rhinoceros unicornis*.

The word *unicornis* did not make the animal mythical.

It described the fact that the animal possessed one prominent horn.

This historical evidence accomplishes something important.

It demonstrates that the word “unicorn” could be connected with a real animal.

It explains why translators might use the word

without asking their readers to believe in a magical horse.

But we need to be careful.

Evidence that “unicorn” could refer to a rhinoceros does not prove that the Biblical *re'em* was a rhinoceros.

Those are two different questions.

The first question is:

Could the word “unicorn” historically describe a real animal?

The answer is yes.

The second question is:

Was the *re'em* specifically a rhinoceros?

The honest answer is that we do not know for certain.

A rhinoceros is one possibility.

It is exceptionally strong.

It is wild.

It has one or two horns depending upon the species.

It is not an animal one would expect to harness to a plow.

Some ancient and historical translations associated the *re'em* with the rhinoceros.

The original KJV margin makes the possibility worthy of consideration.

But possibility is not proof.

Other evidence points toward some type of wild cattle.

The *re'em* is associated with bullocks and bulls.

It is compared with an animal that might otherwise perform farm labor.

It possesses horns used for goring.

Many Hebrew scholars identify it with the aurochs,
an enormous wild ancestor of domesticated cattle.
The aurochs was much larger and more dangerous than the cattle most of us know today.
It had powerful horns.
It could not be treated like an ordinary farm animal.
It survived into historical times but is now extinct.
That identification fits much of the Biblical evidence.
But even “aurochs” remains an identification based upon the available evidence.
The Bible never gives us a modern scientific classification.
God did not pause in Job 39
to provide the animal’s Latin genus and species.
The Biblical writers and their original audiences knew the animal.
They did not need the kind of explanation that we wish they had left for us.
Perhaps the re’em was an aurochs.
Perhaps it was another type of wild ox.
Perhaps it was a rhinoceros.
Perhaps it was another powerful horned animal that no longer exists.
We should study the possibilities.
We should compare the evidence.
But we should not convert a possibility into a certainty
just because it gives us a satisfying answer.
This is one of the disciplines of the Reason Together Method.
We separate what is certain,
what is probable
and what is possible.
What is certain?
The Biblical writers referred to a real creature.
The creature was extremely strong.
It was wild and resistant to domestication.
It possessed dangerous horns.
The modern mythical horse is not described in the text.
What is probable?
The re’em was some kind of powerful wild bovine,

perhaps the animal commonly called the aurochs.

That identification fits the Biblical context

and is accepted by many Hebrew scholars.

What is possible?

A rhinoceros may have been intended,

or the word may have been applied differently in different ancient translation traditions.

What should we reject?

We should reject the claim that the Bible teaches the existence of magical horses

simply because a 1611 English translation uses a word that now creates that image.

Someone may respond:

“Pastor, are you saying that the King James Version is wrong?”

No.

I am saying that translation involves carrying meaning from one language into another.

I am saying that English words change.

I am saying that the KJV translators selected a word that made sense within their linguistic and historical world.

I am also saying that the translators themselves supplied “Rhinocerots” as an alternative at Isaiah 34:7.

Modern translations that use “wild ox” are not trying to remove an embarrassing creature from the Bible.

They are translating the same Hebrew word into language that modern readers are more likely to understand correctly.

We give the KJV primary weight in our studies.

We treasure its accuracy.

We treasure its beauty.

We treasure the way its language has shaped generations of English-speaking Christians.

Comparing another translation does not require us to dishonor the KJV.

Sometimes comparison helps us understand what the KJV is saying.

If an older English word has changed meaning,

another translation can help us recover the meaning that modern usage has obscured.

We should never be frightened by that.

The authority belongs to the Word of God,

not to our modern assumptions about an English word.

There is another claim sometimes made in this discussion.

Some people say that “wild ox” cannot be correct
because an ox is, by definition, a domesticated animal.
They call “wild ox” a contradiction.
That argument sounds clever,
but it is not strong enough to carry the weight sometimes placed upon it.
“Wild ox” is an established English animal description.
It can describe a wild bovine resembling or related to domesticated cattle.
Animal names do not always function like strict mathematical definitions.
We should not reject an otherwise reasonable translation
because of a word game in English.
The real question is not whether we can make the phrase “wild ox” sound amusing.
The real question is what animal best fits the Hebrew word and its Biblical context.
The context repeatedly points to power,
horns,
wildness
and resistance to domestication.
That is the evidence we must evaluate.
This subject teaches us something much larger than the identity of one ancient animal.
It teaches us what to do when we encounter something difficult in Scripture.
Some Christians become nervous when they find a strange word.
They fear that asking questions will weaken their faith.
Some immediately grab the first explanation that protects the conclusion they already want.
Others refuse to admit uncertainty
because they think saying “I do not know” is a sign of weak faith.
Skeptics can make the opposite mistake.
They find an unfamiliar expression,
attach the most ridiculous modern meaning possible
and announce that the Bible has been disproven.
Neither response is careful.
Neither response is reasonable.
Faith does not require us to be afraid of evidence.
Faith does not require us to pretend that every question has an easy answer.
Faith does not require us to defend claims the Bible never makes.

If the Bible said that a magical horse flew through the air on rainbow-colored wings, we would need to deal honestly with that statement.

But the Bible says nothing of the kind.

The accusation comes from placing a modern image inside an old English word and then blaming Scripture for the image we supplied.

The better approach is to ask:

What is the original word?

How is it used elsewhere in Scripture?

What characteristics does the context reveal?

How did ancient translators understand it?

What did the English word communicate when the translation was produced?

What conclusions does the evidence support?

Where does the evidence stop?

Those questions do not weaken Scripture.

They clear away misunderstandings that prevent us from hearing Scripture accurately.

But if we end the sermon here,

we will have missed the greatest lesson in the passage.

Job 39 is not primarily about identifying an animal.

God was not trying to satisfy Job's curiosity about zoology.

God was confronting Job with the limits of human understanding and power.

God asked:

"Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee?"

Job's answer had to be no.

"Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow?"

No.

"Wilt thou trust him, because his strength is great?"

No.

"Wilt thou believe him, that he will bring home thy seed?"

No.

Job could not control the creature.

Job could not explain everything about the creature.

Job could not assign it a task

and expect it to obey.

Yet God understood it completely.
God created it.
God knew its strength.
God knew its habits.
God knew where it lived.
God knew what it could do.
What was beyond Job's control
was never beyond God's control.
That was the greater lesson.
Job wanted God to explain the universe to him.
God showed Job that Job could not manage even a small portion of that universe.
Job did not know everything about the earth.
Job did not control the weather.
Job did not command the stars.
Job did not provide food for every wild creature.
Job could not tame the re'em.
But God could be trusted
even when Job could not understand what God was doing.
There are moments in our lives when we want God to explain everything.
Why did this happen?
Why was this prayer not answered the way I hoped?
Why did someone I love become sick?
Why did a relationship end?
Why did an opportunity disappear?
Why did God allow this pain?
Those are not foolish questions.
God is not threatened by honest questions.
The book of Job proves that.
But God may not give us every explanation we request.
Sometimes He reminds us who He is.
Our inability to understand God's work
does not demonstrate that God has lost control.
Our knowledge is limited.

His knowledge is complete.

Our power is limited.

His power is without limit.

We see one moment.

God sees the whole.

We may not be able to identify the re'em with scientific certainty.

God knew every hair on its body.

God knew the strength in its muscles.

God knew the shape of its horns.

God knew when the first one was born
and when the last one died.

The creature that Job could not tame
was still part of God's creation.

The question of the unicorn therefore leads us somewhere far more important than a dictionary.

It leads us to humility.

It reminds us that we are readers of God's Word,
not masters over it.

We approach Scripture ready to learn.

We permit the text to correct the pictures we carry in our minds.

We refuse to make the Bible say something merely because that interpretation would be
convenient.

We also refuse to surrender the truth of Scripture because someone makes a joke about an old
English word.

The Bible does not need us to panic.

It invites us to examine it.

It invites us to reason.

It invites us to compare Scripture with Scripture.

It invites us to recognize the difference between God's perfect knowledge
and our incomplete conclusions.

So,

are there unicorns in the Bible?

Yes,

the English word "unicorn" appears nine times in the King James Version.

But does the Bible teach that magical horses with single spiraling horns once roamed the earth?
No.

The Hebrew text refers to a real,
powerful,
wild
and horned animal.

The precise species cannot be established with certainty.

A wild ox or aurochs is the leading identification.

A rhinoceros remains an interesting historical possibility.

But the modern fantasy creature is a picture we brought to the word.

It is not a creature described by the Word.

The Bible has survived this challenge quite well.

The question is whether we will learn from it.

Will we slow down before reaching a conclusion?

Will we examine the evidence?

Will we acknowledge uncertainty?

Will we distinguish between what Scripture says
and what we imagine when we hear an English word?

Will we trust God when our knowledge remains incomplete?

There is a statement worth remembering:

We may not know the precise identity of every creature God made,
but we can know the Creator who made every creature.

The re'em was too powerful for Job to control.

But it was never too powerful for God.

The questions of life may be too difficult for us to answer.

But they are never too difficult for God.

The circumstances surrounding us may be beyond our control.

But they are never beyond His control.

The God who spoke to Job from the whirlwind
still speaks through His Word.

He does not ask us to abandon our minds.

He asks us to recognize their limits.

He does not ask us to pretend that we know everything.

He asks us to trust the One who does.

Perhaps you came here carrying questions much heavier than the identity of an ancient animal.

Perhaps your question concerns your family.

Perhaps it concerns your health.

Perhaps it concerns something you have done.

Perhaps it concerns something that was done to you.

Perhaps you have wondered whether God sees you,

whether God understands

or whether God can be trusted.

The book of Job does not give us a simple explanation for every sorrow.

But it reveals a God whose wisdom extends beyond everything we can see.

That same God loved us enough to enter our suffering.

Jesus Christ came into this world.

He lived without sin.

He carried our sin to the cross.

He died in our place.

He rose from the grave.

Through Him,

forgiveness and eternal life are offered freely.

You do not need to understand everything before coming to Christ.

You do not need to solve every Biblical question before trusting Him.

You come with the knowledge you have,

the questions you carry

and the faith to place yourself in His hands.

If you would like to speak about beginning a relationship with Jesus Christ,

I would be honored to talk with you after the service.

If you need prayer,

I will remain here.

There is no pressure

and there is no public spectacle.

It is simply an invitation.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

thank You for Your Word.

Thank You that we do not need to fear difficult questions.

Thank You that truth can withstand careful examination.

Forgive us for the times we have spoken with certainty
where You have not given certainty.

Forgive us for allowing modern assumptions
to replace careful reading.

Give us wisdom to distinguish between what is certain,
what is probable
and what is merely possible.

Thank You for the King James Bible
and for the generations who have read,
loved
and proclaimed its words.

Help us understand its language faithfully.

Help us recognize when English words have changed
and bring us back to the meaning You intended.

Most of all,
thank You that Your wisdom is greater than ours.

When we cannot control our circumstances,
remind us that You remain in control.

When we cannot understand everything You are doing,
help us trust Your character.

When our questions become heavy,
lead us to Jesus.

Thank You for the forgiveness,
hope
and eternal life offered through Him.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Thank you for reasoning together with us today.

Please join us in the Reason Together Café.

Enjoy a cup of locally grown coffee,

meet someone new

and continue the conversation.

To our first-time guests,

Aloha Nui Loa.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the love of God

and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

be with you all.

Aloha.

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

UNICORNS IN THE BIBLE?

Job 39:9–12

*“Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee,
or abide by thy crib?” Job 39:9*

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

Commentary in Brief

CENTRAL CONCLUSION The King James Bible's "unicorn" is not the magical horse of modern stories. The Hebrew word *re'em* describes a real, formidable, wild and horned animal that human beings could not domesticate. A wild ox, perhaps the extinct aurochs, is the leading identification. The rhinoceros remains a historically significant possibility. The exact species is uncertain, but the Biblical meaning is clear.

The question sounds playful because the word unicorn now brings a familiar picture to mind: a white horse, a single spiraled horn and a creature that belongs to fantasy. When that picture is carried straight into the King James Bible, the verses can seem strange or embarrassing. The problem is not Scripture. The problem is that a familiar English word has changed around us.

Nine verses in the King James Version use unicorn or unicorns. None describes a gentle horse. Together they portray extraordinary strength, dangerous horns, wild freedom and resistance to human control. Job 39 supplies the fullest description. God asks whether Job can make this animal serve at the crib, accept a harness, plow a furrow or carry the harvest home. Every expected answer is no.

This commentary explains how the Hebrew *re'em* came through Greek and Latin translation history into the English word unicorn, what the 1611 margin contributes and why modern translations often say wild ox. It also separates what can be stated confidently from what must remain a careful possibility. The purpose is not to win an argument over an animal. It is to read an older translation honestly and to hear the greater lesson God gave Job.

1. Start with the Picture in Our Minds

A Modern Image Arrives Before the Text

For most modern readers, unicorn is already defined before the Bible is opened. Children's books, decorations and fantasy stories have supplied a complete image. The moment the word appears in Job, that image is imported into the verse. The reader then asks why the Bible speaks about a mythical animal.

That reaction is understandable, but it begins at the wrong end of interpretation. We should not first ask what unicorn means in popular culture today. We should ask what the Biblical text says about the creature and what the English word could communicate in the history of translation. An old English word must be read as an old English word.

Words Can Outlive Familiar Meanings

The King James translation has not changed in Job 39, but ordinary English has. Scripture contains other words whose common use has shifted. Conversation once carried the sense of conduct. Prevent could mean go before. Charity could name Christian love more broadly than modern charitable giving. A reader honors the KJV by learning how its words functioned, not by forcing every present-day association into them.

READING PRINCIPLE Do not place a modern picture inside an older word before examining the Biblical context, the source language and the history of translation.

2. Let Job 39 Describe the Creature

God's Questions Supply the Profile

Job 39:9–12 asks, “Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee? Wilt thou trust him, because his strength is great? or wilt thou leave thy labour to him? Wilt thou believe him, that he will bring home thy seed, and gather it into thy barn?”

The questions are practical and agricultural. The animal has great strength, but Job cannot turn that strength into dependable farm labor. It will not calmly remain at the feeding place. It will not submit to the band or harness. It cannot be trusted to plow, harrow, transport seed or gather the harvest. The contrast is not between a real ox and an imaginary horse. It is between human management and wild power.

The Point Is Untamability

God is not testing Job's zoological vocabulary. He is confronting the limits of Job's control. A domesticated ox can be trained to serve. The re'em cannot. Job may see its strength and wish to use it, but wishing does not produce mastery. The creature answers to the Creator rather than to Job.

BIBLICAL PROFILE The creature is real within the argument, exceptionally strong, wild, horned, dangerous and unavailable for domestication. That profile governs the interpretation.

3. Read All Nine KJV Occurrences Together

Strength and Deliverance

Numbers 23:22 and 24:8 compare God's strength in bringing Israel out of Egypt to “the strength of an unicorn.” The comparison works because the animal was known for power. Psalm 29:6 describes the mountains skipping “like a young unicorn,” using vigorous animal movement to portray creation trembling at the voice of the Lord. Psalm 92:10 says, “my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn,” joining horn imagery with strength and exaltation.

Horns and Danger

Deuteronomy 33:17 speaks of Joseph's glory and says, “his horns are like the horns of unicorns.” The plural horns are then applied symbolically to Ephraim and Manasseh. Psalm 22:21 asks for deliverance “from the horns of the unicorns.” Isaiah 34:7 includes unicorns in a scene of judgment, slaughter and blood. These passages add force, horned danger and ferocity to the profile.

No single poetic expression should carry more weight than the whole pattern. Psalm 92 speaks of a horn in the singular, but Biblical poetry can focus on one horn as a symbol of strength. Deuteronomy 33 uses horns in the plural. Neither grammatical form provides a reliable horn count for the species. Together the passages tell us the creature had formidable horns. They do not settle exactly which animal it was.

CONTEXT PRINCIPLE Collect the descriptions before selecting the species. The passages establish the kind of animal more securely than they establish its modern zoological name.

4. The Hebrew Word Re'em

A Rare Animal Name

Behind unicorn in these passages is the Hebrew word commonly transliterated re'em. It is a rare animal term. Its meaning must be recovered from the passages in which it appears, related ancient language evidence and early translations. That process produces a strong general profile while leaving the precise species debated.

Modern Hebrew lexicons commonly identify the word with a wild ox or aurochs. The aurochs was a large, powerful wild ancestor of domestic cattle. It survived in parts of Europe into the seventeenth century, though populations in the ancient Near East disappeared much earlier. Its size, horns, force and resistance to domestication fit the Biblical descriptions well.

What a Lexicon Can and Cannot Do

A lexicon summarizes evidence. It is an important guide, but a gloss is not a photograph. When Brown-Driver-Briggs or a modern lexicon offers wild ox, the entry identifies the leading sense scholars infer from the evidence. It does not create absolute certainty that every historical and zoological question has been answered.

EVIDENCE LIMIT We can confidently explain what the animal was like and what it was not. We should be more modest when naming the exact species.

5. How Re'em Became "Unicorn"

Greek and Latin Stages

Long before the King James Version, Jewish translators rendered re'em in the Greek Septuagint with a word associated with one horn. The Latin Vulgate continued that tradition with terms such as unicornis or rhinoceros. English translators inherited a translation history that was already many centuries old. The KJV translators did not suddenly invent a fantastic animal and insert it into Job.

Ancient translators may have been identifying an animal, following a traditional name or interpreting a prominent horn. Their wording shows how the term traveled. It does not, by itself, prove the anatomy of the Hebrew animal. Translation history is evidence about how readers understood a word. The Hebrew contexts remain the controlling evidence for the Biblical profile.

The English Tradition

Unicorn appeared in English Bibles before 1611. By the time of the KJV, it was an established rendering supported by Greek, Latin and English precedent. The word also carried legendary associations in European culture, so we should not pretend that mythology was unknown. Yet translators and dictionary writers could also use unicorn while discussing animals they believed existed in the natural world.

INTERPRETIVE RULE Ancient versions help us trace the history of interpretation. They must be heard as witnesses, while the Hebrew usage and Biblical context govern the conclusion.

6. What the 1611 Margin Tells Us

“Or, Rhinoceros”

At Isaiah 34:7, the 1611 King James Bible placed a marginal alternative beside unicorns: “Or, Rhinoceros.” That note is valuable because it shows the translators were thinking in real-animal categories. They recognized uncertainty about the English identification and supplied rhinoceros as an alternative.

The margin does not prove that rhinoceros is the final answer. A marginal alternative records a translation possibility, not an inspired zoological ruling. It does, however, make one conclusion difficult to maintain: that the KJV translators intended readers to imagine nothing more than the magical horse of modern fantasy.

A Window into Translation Judgment

The note also reminds us that responsible translation can preserve more than one possible rendering when the evidence is limited. The translators could place unicorn in the text and rhinoceros in the margin without believing Scripture had failed. They were acknowledging the ordinary difficulty of matching an ancient animal name to a familiar English one.

TRANSLATION HISTORY The 1611 margin does not settle the species. It does show that a real rhinoceros was within the translators’ field of interpretation.

7. What Did “Unicorn” Mean in Older English?

More Than One Association

Older English usage was not limited to one clean definition. Unicorn could refer to the legendary single-horned beast of art and story. It could also be used in discussions of supposedly real horned animals. Writers sometimes tried to connect ancient reports with the rhinoceros, one-horned antelopes or other creatures known imperfectly through travel accounts.

Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary, written more than two centuries after the KJV, illustrates this continuing real-animal usage. His entry discusses unicorn in relation to animals including the rhinoceros. That evidence is useful, but it must be used carefully. It shows that the word could still function as an animal-identification term in later English. It does not prove exactly what every translator meant in 1611.

The KJV Did Not Change

The printed word remains the same. The mental picture most readers attach to it has narrowed. That is why study is necessary. Explaining a changed English word does not correct Scripture. It helps a modern reader understand the translation according to the evidence available in the verse and its history.

TRANSLATION PRINCIPLE The King James Bible did not change. English changed. Faithful reading sometimes requires recovering an older range of meaning.

8. Wild Ox, Aurochs or Rhinoceros?

Why Wild Ox Leads

Wild ox is the leading modern translation because it fits the contexts and the lexical evidence. The animal's great strength, horns and refusal of farm service make immediate sense in Job 39. A wild bovine also creates the exact contrast the passage develops: an animal resembling the useful strength of domestic cattle, yet too wild to be tied to the crib or trusted with the harvest.

Aurochs is often proposed as the more specific identification. Ancient art and remains confirm that large wild cattle once lived across the region. The proposal is strong, but the English phrase wild ox communicates the general sense without pretending to a level of certainty the Hebrew word may not allow.

Why Rhinoceros Remains Worth Mentioning

Rhinoceros has genuine historical support through the KJV margin and aspects of the older translation tradition. A rhinoceros is powerful, horned, dangerous and not an ordinary farm animal. Those features fit much of the profile. Difficulties remain, including the plural horns in Deuteronomy 33 and the strength of the wild-bovine lexical identification. The plural, however, is poetic and symbolic, so it should not be treated as a simple anatomical disproof.

The most responsible public conclusion is therefore graded. Wild ox or aurochs is the leading identification. Rhinoceros is a historically significant possibility. The exact species is uncertain. The modern fantasy horse is not what the Biblical descriptions present.

CERTAINTY AND PROBABILITY Certain: a real, powerful, wild, horned animal. Probable: a wild ox, likely an aurochs. Possible: a rhinoceros. Unwarranted: claiming that the text teaches a magical horse.

9. Why "Wild Ox" Does Not Dishonor the KJV

Translation and Explanation

Some readers hear wild ox as though a modern translation is correcting a mistake. That need not be the case. Translation always asks which word in the receiving language most clearly communicates the source. When the meaning of an English word changes, a newer rendering may make the older translation's intended animal category easier to recognize.

A pastor can read unicorn from the KJV and then explain re'em as a wild, horned animal commonly identified as a wild ox. That is no more disrespectful than explaining that quick can mean living, that meat can mean food or that let can sometimes mean hinder. Explanation serves reading.

Honor Does Not Require Overclaiming

We do not defend the KJV by insisting that one English word supplies scientific precision beyond the Hebrew. Nor do we honor modern scholarship by speaking contemptuously of the older rendering. The better posture is gratitude and accuracy. The KJV preserves an ancient translation tradition. Modern lexical work helps readers see the animal profile more immediately.

MINISTRY POSTURE Honor the translation, explain the English and refuse to make loyalty to Scripture depend upon an uncertain animal identification.

10. What We Know, Think and Do Not Know

A Discipline of Honest Speech

Biblical teaching becomes more trustworthy when confidence is matched to evidence. We know the re'em was treated as a real creature. We know it possessed extraordinary strength and formidable horns. We know Job could not domesticate or employ it. We know that Israel's poets and prophets used it as an image of power, danger and exaltation.

We have strong reason to think wild ox is the best general identification and aurochs is a plausible specific one. We have historical reason to keep rhinoceros in the discussion. We do not know the exact species with certainty. We do not know that the animal had only one horn. We do not know that every ancient translator was picturing the same creature.

Uncertainty Is Not Unbelief

The authority of Scripture does not depend upon pretending to possess information Scripture does not give. God's Word can communicate its theological point even when an ancient plant, measure, stone or animal cannot be identified with modern precision. Honest limits protect interpretation from becoming speculation presented as doctrine.

PASTORAL ASSURANCE Saying "I do not know exactly" is not weak faith when the evidence is limited. It is submission to the difference between what God has revealed and what we have inferred.

11. The Greater Lesson of Job 39

Job Is Not in Control

The re'em appears within a long series of divine questions. God speaks of the foundations of the earth, the sea, morning, snow, stars, weather, lions, ravens, wild goats, the wild ass, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk and the eagle. Job cannot command these realms. He did not design their powers, appoint their seasons or guarantee their provision.

The wild animal's strength is deliberately useless to Job. He cannot bind it to his purposes. That limitation exposes the deeper human temptation to believe that what we cannot manage must be meaningless or out of control. Job's suffering had brought him to questions larger than his knowledge. God answered by showing that divine wisdom governs a world far beyond Job's reach.

Beyond Job's Control, Within God's Rule

The creature that will not answer Job still belongs to God. Its wilderness is not outside providence. Its strength does not threaten the Creator. The same truth applies to the unanswered parts of Job's life. Human inability to explain or control an event does not establish divine absence.

THEOLOGICAL CENTER What was beyond Job's control was never beyond God's control. The untamable creature became a witness to the wisdom, power and rule of its Creator.

12. A Pastoral Answer for Honest Questions

Bring the Question to the Text

A question about unicorns can become a useful lesson in Biblical interpretation. Begin with the passage rather than the popular image. Compare every occurrence. Examine the Hebrew word. Trace the history of translation. Distinguish a firm conclusion from a probable identification. Allow the main point of the passage to remain the main point.

This method does not remove wonder. It directs wonder toward the right object. Scripture is not asking us to admire a fantasy creature. It is asking us to stand with Job before a God whose wisdom rules powerful realities that no human being can tame.

Come to Christ with the Questions That Remain

Christians do not need to fear careful questions. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, and truth does not become fragile when it is examined honestly. Some questions receive a clear answer. Others receive a responsible range of possibilities. In both cases, the believer can refuse mockery, refuse panic and keep reasoning from the Word of God.

The deepest comfort is not that we can identify every ancient animal. It is that the Creator knows His creation completely and has made Himself known in His Son. The God who governed the wilderness of Job's world also entered our suffering, bore our sin and rose again. We may bring our limited knowledge to Him because His knowledge, wisdom and grace are complete.

Conclusion: The Word and the Wonder

Does the Bible really teach that unicorns existed? It teaches that the animal called re'em in Hebrew existed and that the KJV renders that name unicorn. It does not teach the existence of the magical horse now associated with the English word. The Biblical creature was powerful, horned, wild and untamable.

Wild ox, probably the aurochs, is the leading identification. Rhinoceros remains a meaningful historical possibility. The exact zoological answer is less certain than the contextual answer. We should state both facts without embarrassment.

The final lesson belongs to Job 39. Job could not make the re'em serve him, but God did not need Job's harness to rule it. The animal's wild strength marked the boundary of human power

and displayed the reach of divine wisdom. The verse that first seems strange becomes part of a magnificent answer: creation is larger than we can manage, but it is never larger than its Creator.

ENDURING COUNSEL Do not make Scripture carry the modern picture of an ancient word. Read the context, respect the evidence, acknowledge the limits and let the untamable creature lead you to the unrivaled Creator.

Selected Sources

Primary Scripture

Numbers 23:22; Numbers 24:8; Deuteronomy 33:17; Job 39:9–12; Psalm 22:21; Psalm 29:6; Psalm 92:10; Isaiah 34:7. Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

Biblical and Interpretive Resources

The Holy Bible, King James Version, 1611, including the marginal note at Isaiah 34:7. The Septuagint, consulted for the Greek translation tradition. The Latin Vulgate, consulted for the Latin translation tradition. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, entry for re'em. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, entry for re'em. Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828, entries for “unicorn” and “rhinoceros.”

Pastoral Note

This commentary distinguishes the clear Biblical profile from the less certain zoological identification. Its purpose is to help readers understand the KJV wording, reason carefully from Scripture and keep the theological purpose of Job 39 in view.