

Job 39 — The LORD's Bestiary — The Wild Goats, the Untamed Ass, the Unicorn Who Will Not Serve, the Foolish Ostrich, the War-Horse Clothed in Thunder, and the Eagle on the Crag

Job 39: the LORD continues answering out of the whirlwind, now touring the wild creatures no human tames or feeds — the calving goats and hinds, the wild ass loosed from the city, the unicorn who will not plow, the ostrich deprived of wisdom, the war-horse who mocks at fear, and the hawk and eagle who soar and nest on high; part of the cornerstone theophany of Job 38–41.

The voice out of the whirlwind has not paused for breath. In chapter 38 God swept Job across the whole architecture of creation — the foundations of the earth, the doors of the sea, the storehouses of snow, the ordinances of heaven — and never once explained why a righteous man was sitting in ashes. Now, in chapter 39, the tour narrows from cosmos to creatures, and something remarkable happens: the God who set the boundaries of the sea starts talking about *animals*. Wild ones. The goat that calves alone in a cliff, the ass that laughs at the city, the ostrich who forgets her own eggs, the war-horse quivering to charge, the eagle whose eye can find a carcass from a mile up.

Hebrew Word Studies

yada (H3045) (יָדָע) — **to know — by experience, intimacy, and relationship, not mere information vv. 1, 2.** The whirlwind speeches are built on a repeated question — *do you know?* — and the verb is never the cool knowing of a spectator. *Yada* is the Bible's word for the knowing that comes only from being inside a thing: "Adam knew Eve his wife" (Gen. 4:1), "before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee" (Jer. 1:5), "the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous" (Ps. 1:6). So when God asks whether Job *knows* the time the wild goats calve, he is not quizzing him on zoology; he is drawing the line between the One who sustains creation from the inside and the creature who can only observe it from the outside. This is the mercy hidden in the whole interrogation. God is not humiliating Job with trivia — he is inviting him to trade the knowing he does not have (the reasoned defense he demanded) for the knowing he can have: the intimacy of trusting a Maker he has now heard with his own ears. Job's final confession runs on this very verb — "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee" (42:5). The point was never for Job to *know* the answer. It was for Job to know the One who does.

pere (H6501) / reem (H7214) (פָּרָה / רֵעָם) — **the wild ass / the wild ox (KJV "unicorn") vv. 5, 9, 10.** Two untamable creatures set side by side, and the KJV's "unicorn" has misled centuries of readers — *reem* is not a mythical horned horse but the aurochs, the great wild ox of the ancient world, an animal of such proverbial strength that its horns become a byword for power ("his horns are like the horns of unicorns," Deut. 33:17). Bring the two together and the argument sharpens. *Pere*, the wild ass, is freedom man did not grant — "who hath loosed the bands?" God asks, claiming the loosing as his own. *Reem*, the wild ox, is strength man cannot harness — "will he harrow the valleys after thee?" The domestic donkey and the plow ox are the two most useful animals in Job's economy; God deliberately names the wild, useless twins of each and asks who governs *those*. The answer decenters the whole human-usefulness frame Job and his friends assumed. Scripture keeps the *reem* as an emblem of a strength that belongs to God to give: "thou hast exalted my horn like the horn of the *reem*" (Ps. 92:10, translated "unicorn"). The creature no farmer can yoke becomes the very image of the strength the LORD lends his servants — a strength, note, that comes as gift and never as conquest.

chokmah (H2451) / nashah (H5382) (חֹכְמָה / נָשָׂה) — **wisdom / to cause to forget, to deprive v. 17.** This is the most theologically daring verse in the chapter, and it turns on two words. *Chokmah* is *wisdom* — the great prize of the whole wisdom tradition, the thing Proverbs says is "more precious than rubies" and Job himself hymned in chapter 28 ("where shall wisdom be found?"). *Nashah* means to make forget, to withhold, to leave destitute. Put them together and God says, of the ostrich, that he *withheld wisdom from her* — the Author of wisdom deliberately made a creature without it. The friends' entire case rested on the assumption that God governs the world by a legible wisdom you can reverse-engineer from outcomes: suffering means sin, prosperity means favor, everything readable. But a God who freely deprives a bird of *chokmah* and then delights to watch her outrun a war-horse is a God whose freedom overflows every human scheme of sense. The lesson lands directly on Job's suffering: not everything God does can be reverse-engineered into a reason, and the inability to find the reason is not evidence that no wisdom is at work — only that the wisdom belongs to God, who "giveth not account of any of his matters" (Job 33:13). The ostrich is God's living argument that his ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33) — and that this is cause for wonder, not despair.

gevurah (H1369) / labash (H3847) (גִּבּוֹר / לָבַשׁ) — **might, strength / to clothe, to put on as a garment v. 19.** "Hast thou given the horse *strength* (*gevurah*)? hast thou *clothed* (*labash*) his neck with thunder?" Both words are quietly enormous. *Gevurah* is not ordinary muscle; it is *might* in the heroic, even divine sense — the word the prophets use for the strength of God himself ("the mighty God," and Isaiah's promised child called on with the same root). To ask whether Job *gave* the horse its *gevurah* is to ask whether Job dispenses the kind of power that Scripture usually reserves to heaven. And *labash*, "to clothe," is the tender verb of the making; God did not merely grant the horse strength, he *dressed* him in it, draped thunder over his neck like a garment. It is the same verb used when the LORD "clothed" Adam and Eve with skins (Gen. 3:21), when the Spirit "clothed" Gideon (Judg. 6:34, Hebrew), when the Psalmist says God is "clothed with honour and majesty" (Ps. 104:1). The war-horse wears his terrible strength the way God wears majesty — as a garment God himself put on him. Job cannot tailor thunder. He can only recognize, in the shudder of a stallion scenting battle, a power whose source is not human — and, recognizing it, learn the posture the whole book has been driving toward: not mastery of the mystery, but trust in its Author.

From the Chapter's Architecture

There is a quiet thread stitching the creatures together, too — the thread of scorn. The wild ass "scorneth the multitude of the city" (v. 7); the ostrich "scorneth the horse and his rider" (v. 18); the war-horse "mocketh at fear" (v. 22) — the same Hebrew root of laughing derision runs through all three. The wild things laugh: at the city, at the rider, at fear itself. And the laughter is instructive. Everything the wild creature scorns — the city, the driver, the fear of the sword — is something humans use to feel in control. God's untamed world simply laughs at the instruments of human mastery, and in laughing, teaches Job that the universe was never organized around his control in the first place. The architecture of the chapter is the architecture of the whole whirlwind: overwhelming abundance, deployed not to crush Job but to enlarge him — to lift his eyes off the narrow ledger of his own deserving and out onto a world too wide, too wild, and too tenderly kept to be reduced to the arithmetic of reward and punishment.