



# Deer

## AS IMAGERY in the Old Testament

**G**OD'S CREATIVE POWER and redemptive purposes are twin realities of the world we and all of God's creatures inhabit. Inspired by a world so powerfully and purposely crafted, the biblical writers found in creation numerous examples to explain and explore their trust in the world's Creator and Redeemer. Animals, in particular the undomesticated creatures that fill God's world with wildness and wonder, display in the Scriptures a certain strength and wisdom. In addition, they serve as vivid and visual reminders of the radical dependence of all of God's creatures on the Creator's sustaining power and loving care.

Psalm 104, the great hymn in praise of the Creator, provides a profound context for the Bible's use of animal imagery. This psalm offers praise to Yahweh for having made a world filled with creatures innumerable, great and small, living in wondrous freedom from human control and in complete dependence on God's provisions (Ps. 104:24-30).

Kevin Hall

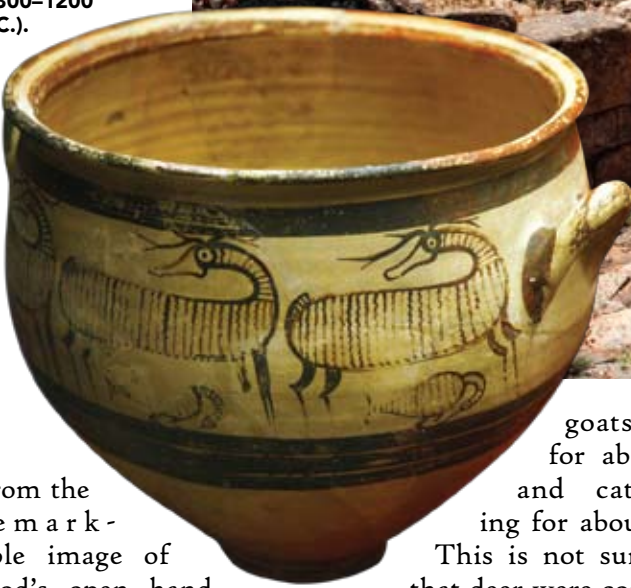
**Right: Part of the entrance gate complex at Dan. Probably indicative of the rest of ancient Israel, deer was a staple in the diet of people living at Dan.**

**Below: Mycenaean krater (bowl) decorated with stags and birds; from Greece; dated to Late Helladic III period (1300–1200 B.C.).**

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From the remarkable image of God’s open hand feeding these creatures (v. 28) to the equally remarkable statement of God’s ongoing creative care (v. 30), a context for the biblical use of animal imagery emerges. In the psalmist’s vision, the fulsomeness of an earth populated with a variety of creatures becomes a wonderful tapestry of rich images all bearing witness to divine power, wisdom, and grace. No wonder then that deer, plentiful in the land of ancient Israel, are employed in the Psalms and elsewhere as a particular example of what all God’s creatures exemplify.

**DEER IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

Deer bones found in Iron Age excavations at Dan (in northern Israel) indicate that deer made up about 4 percent of the meat supply, with sheep and

goats accounting for about 7 percent and cattle accounting for about 89 percent.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising given that deer were considered clean animals and therefore acceptable food for the Israelites (see Deut. 12:15,22). Deer probably roamed throughout the land of promise in fairly large herds during the Old Testament era. Considered by many scholars to be a variety of the Iranian fallow deer, slightly larger than the European variety, the fallow deer would have thrived in ancient Israel before the deforestation of later periods.<sup>2</sup> Though certainly a part of the food supply and a common feature of the forests of ancient Israel, deer were never domesticated.<sup>3</sup> The deer’s freedom from human control and ability to thrive in the land seems the best explanation for its use as an image of agility and grace and of dependence on the Creator’s care.

**AGILITY AND GRACE**

Both King David and the prophet Habakkuk used the deer as an image of agility and grace. Praising God as his rock and his fortress, David expressed thanks that God “makes my feet like hinds’ feet, and sets me on my high places” (2 Sam. 22:34, NASB).<sup>4</sup> In the context of this hymn, David celebrated his God-given ability to traverse with grace and agility the peaks and valleys of his life as God’s appointed leader. Like the deer he must have often seen in the hill country of Israel, by God’s grace and power David ascended victoriously to safety and security out of the reach of his enemies.

In like fashion, Habakkuk, struggling as he did to live by faith in times of great national travail (Hab. 1:2-4), could survey his situation and celebrate

**LESSON REFERENCE**  
BSFL: Psalm 42





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**Above:** Ivory carving depicting a grazing stag. From Arslan Tash (ancient Hadattu in northern Syria); dated 9th–7th centuries B.C.

**Left:** Close up of a fallow deer (Latin, *dama dama*).

**Below:** Dated from the Early Bronze Age (3150–2200 B.C.), statuette of a stag; from Ankara in the Anatolian Plateau.

## OUR CREATURELINESS

When I was a third grader, my rather stern teacher made me memorize the proverb, “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” (Prov. 6:6; KJV). That assignment seems a bit contrived for third grade boys who are usually as busy as a beehive. The proverb may also seem a little odd for those who rarely contemplate the life all around us. The biblical writers, however, discerned God’s redemptive purpose and creative power and readily confessed their own creatureliness. Their confessions have left us with simple, yet profound images of God’s abundant gifts and ample provisions. In today’s society, which prizes self-determination and success, the biblical imagery of the deer calls us to remember that the abundant blessings we enjoy come ultimately not from our own efforts, but from the hand of God. **B**

the ability to overcome with the grace and agility of a deer. At the end of an extraordinary vision of the outworking of God’s wrath and mercy, Habakkuk with great confidence and hope, echoed David’s amazement that God “has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places” (Hab. 3:19, NASB). Again the deer provided a vivid image of God offering strength so persons could transcend life’s struggles.

## DEPENDENCE ON GOD

As untamed animals that thrived in the land, deer also demonstrated another facet of the freedom God’s creatures enjoy—their complete dependence on God’s gracious provisions. This seems to be the background for the psalmist’s cry, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God” (Psalm 42:1, NASB).

The psalmist thus indicated that his spiritual thirst could be satisfied only by the sustaining presence of God. He mirrors this thirst in the panting of the graceful and sturdy deer that is desperate for the life-giving refreshment of a cool running stream. The panting of this graceful creature is a poignant symbol of the need for sustenance from a source outside oneself. Further, by comparing his plight to the plight of a creature like the deer, desperate for something as basic to life as water, the psalmist was able to confess his inability to live without God, his one and only hope for what he needed.



1. Edwin Firmage, “Zoology (Animal Profiles)” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1142.
2. Ibid. See also Randall W. Younker, “Deer” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 335-36.
3. Firmage, 1142.
4. “Hind” translates the feminine form of the Hebrew term *ayyal* and would indicate a doe.

Kevin Hall is professor of religion and occupies the Ida Elizabeth & J. W. Hollums Chair of Bible, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma.