

CATEGORIES OF ANIMALS

CULTURAL INSIGHT

The ancient Israelites had a different way of categorizing animals than we do today. Genesis 1:24 divides “living creatures” into three categories: cattle, creeping things, and beasts of the earth. Rather than being redundant, these are all specific kinds of animals. “Cattle” is used more broadly than we usually use it in modern English. It is the translation of the Hebrew *behemah* and refers to all domesticated animals, not simply cows, including goats and sheep as well as cows. “Creeping things” include all the small animals, such as rodents, lizards, or amphibians that crawl on the earth. According to Leviticus 11:29–30, these animals convey a specific kind of ritual impurity. “Beasts of the earth” or “beasts of the field” are the rest of the wild animals.

These categories can break down in interesting ways. Although snakes are definitely what many people would call creeping things, that is not how they are categorized in the Old Testament. The snake is instead one of the “beasts of the field” (see Genesis 3:1). This also makes it very clear that according to Genesis 6:20, not all animals were brought onto the ark. That verse lists fowls, creeping things, and cattle but excludes beasts of the field, suggesting that Genesis does not seem to include wild animals in Noah’s mandate. Knowing these different categories can help us better understand the ways in which the ancient Israelites understood their world.

Related verses

Genesis 1:24–25

Genesis 3:1, 14

Genesis 6:20

Deuteronomy 7:22

1 Samuel 17:44
2 Samuel 21:10
Job 5:23
Psalm 8:7
Isaiah 43:20
Isaiah 56:9
Jeremiah 12:9

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