

Animals of the Bible (5) – The Red Deer



The male Red Deer, called the “hart” in the Authorised Version, is mentioned 11 times in the Bible, and the female, or “hind” 10 times. It seems evident from these references that it was both plentiful and valuable in the Old Testament period. Only the male is referred to as a food item, which is possibly an example of good conservation practice. The females will bear a fawn each year, whilst only a small number of males are needed for breeding purposes. They were regularly on the menu in Solomon’s palace (1 Kings 4: 23)

In the UK today, the Red Deer is most common in Scotland, where there is no lack of water, but in the Middle East water can become scarce in times of drought, and streams can dry up completely. This was in the mind of the writer of Psalm 42, which, in the Good News Bible, begins, “As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for you, the living God; when can I go and worship in your presence?” In the original Hebrew the Psalmist uses a word that refers to the bleating sound made by the deer when they were in an agony of thirst during a drought.

Read on in this Psalm and it becomes clear that the writer was longing to worship in the Temple, but was far away from Jerusalem. Maybe he was living during a time of war, or was one of the exiles in Babylon, we cannot be sure. “My heart breaks when I remember the past”, he writes, “when I went with the crowds to the house of God...” (verse 4). Maybe you have sometimes felt like that when Covid-19 restrictions have kept you from attending your usual place of worship. I was recently listening to a recording of the organ of West Kirby Methodist Church and felt a sudden pang of longing to be back in its familiar surroundings with my fellow worshippers once again.

Psalms 42 and 43 appear to be two parts of the same Psalm, and there is a refrain that is repeated twice in the former and once in the latter. "Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise Him, my saviour and my God." Let those words comfort us as we look forward to the time when we can return with our friends to our beloved places of worship. Never forget, though, that God is still with us, here and now, wherever we may be.

A Prayer:

As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you.
You alone are my strength, my shield, to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you. AMEN

(Singing the Faith 544, Martin J. Nystrom, b. 1956)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Hürriyet Daily News, Turkey

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