

Bible Survey: Section 6: Wisdom & Poetry

Supplement: Behemoth & Leviathan

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In the book of Job, God mentioned two unfamiliar creatures: Behemoth and Leviathan. Their identity has been debated for centuries.

Some have suggested they were mythological creatures. That interpretation is wrong. First, before mentioning Behemoth and Leviathan, God speaks about the natural creation across some sixty-eight verses. Nine other animals are mentioned. Everything in God's speech was real. Second, the things God mentioned must have been familiar to Job and real to have made the point that Job is out of his depth in questioning the Creator of all these things. Introducing products of human imagination would not make sense. The mythological interpretation is easily ruled out.

Several commentators and translators have proposed that Behemoth was a hippo or elephant and Leviathan was a crocodile. The ASV and NASB have "hippopotamus" and "crocodile" in the footnotes for Job 40:15 and 41:1. The descriptions of these two imposing creatures, however, excludes hippos, elephants, crocodiles, and any modern animals as candidates.

Of Behemoth, God pointed out that its belly and legs are strong, its tail is like a cedar tree, its bones are like metal bars, it gets food from the mountains, it is not bothered by a rushing river, and it cannot be captured or domesticated. Verse 19 suggests it is the largest animal God made. Any honest reader cannot help but picture an enormous dinosaur. Obviously, hippos and elephants do not have tails that in any way resemble a cedar, nor do they get food from the mountains.

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Leviathan is even more intimidating. It could not be caught. People only hoped to avoid it, for encounters would likely be deadly. It was large and strong, its face was like a door, its hide was impenetrable, its eyes were huge, it breathed fire and smoke, it crashed when it rose, it left a huge wake, and it was unbothered by man's best weapons. While a few of these traits could fit a crocodile, most do not. Crocodiles have been hunted and captured from ancient times. Their belly is soft, they do not breathe fire, and they do not leave great white wakes. There are certainly more intimidating creatures than crocodiles, even today.

What creatures fit the descriptions in Job? If one were to describe the great dinosaurs that are now extinct, namely the sauropods, Behemoth is a perfect match. A subgroup called Titanosaurs included the largest dinos, such as the Argentinosaurus. Likewise, great marine reptiles like plesiosaurs and mosasaurs would be perfect matches for Leviathan, aptly described as sea monsters.

What, then, is the motive for reducing the two chief examples of God's creation in Job 40-41 to myths or exaggerations? Evolutionary thinking. The evolution-based timeline places dinosaurs and sea monsters millions of years before humans, in direct contradiction to the Genesis narrative. While it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the evolution-creation and age-of-the-earth debates, suffice it to say that there is abundant evidence from around the world that humans co-existed with these magnificent creatures. It is no surprise, then, that Job was familiar with Behemoth and Leviathan, a gigantic dinosaur and a terrifying sea monster.

God saved the most impressive creatures for last. If a mere man could not contend with such monsters, much less should he try to contend with their Maker.