



PEETERS

Behemoth and Leviathan

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ANIMADVERSIONES

Behemoth and Leviathan

The climax of God's speeches in the Theophany in Job 40–41 is his description of Behemoth and Leviathan. There is currently a consensus that these beasts are dangerous and frightening, and that even their description is frightening, and as such they serve to emphasize God's affinity with the forces of chaos and the indifference of the universe to human concerns ¹. A re-examination of the identities and qualities of these creatures is in order, and this may contribute to an understanding of God's message in the Theophany.

1. *Behemoth* (Job 40,15-24)

Almost all commentators identify Behemoth, correctly, as the hippopotamus ². Behemoth is massive and powerful. It spends its days in the river, often with its mouth agape, so that the river can be said to gush into its mouth (40,23) ³. It “eats grass like an ox” (40,15b). The only visible disparity is the comparison of the hippopotamus's tail (actually quite short, at about 45 cm.)

¹ See, for example, E.L. GREENSTEIN, “The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job”, *Mishneh Todah*. Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay (eds. N.S. FOX et al.; Winona Lake, IN 2009) 333-362, at 355; and J.G. WILLIAMS, “You Have Not Spoken Truth of Me: Mystery and Irony in Job”, *ZAW* 83 (1971) 231-255, at 246.

² This is the consensus; see the survey and discussion in D.J.A. CLINES, *Job 38-42* (WBC; Nashville, TN 2011) 148-157. In the Theophany בְּהֵמוֹת is used as a masculine singular. In Job 12,7 is a collective for beasts treated as a feminine singular noun. (This is clearly equivalent to the plural treatment of the form in 35,11). In Ps 73,22ב בְּהֵמוֹת is an actual singular. In the Theophany, the word was probably chosen to designate the hippopotamus in the absence of a proper term for the creature in Hebrew. It would mean something like “super-beast.” Against B. Couroyer's thesis that Behemoth is the wild ox (“Qui est Béhémoth: Job 40,15-24?”, *RB* 82 [1975] 418-443), see the detailed arguments of O. KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung an Ijob*. Eine Deutung von Ijob 38-41 vor dem Hintergrund der zeitgenössischen Bildkunst (FRLANT 121; Göttingen 1978) 127-131.

³ As for עֲשָׂק, the context requires an action of the river that might be expected to daunt most creatures but does not affect the hippopotamus. It seems to me that there is a metaphorical shift from “oppress”, the usual meaning of עֲשָׂק, to “assail” or the like.

to a cedar (40,17)⁴. Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus, both of whom visited Egypt, made the same error⁵. Also contrary to the reality of the hippopotamus is the notion that the produce of the mountains comes to it, if that is what 40,20 means. However, the mountains have no relevance to the hippopotamus and certainly have no “produce” in Egypt. We should probably emend הרים בול to הרים יבול; hence: “For the rivers bring him produce, and all the animals of the field play there”. In other words, the hippopotamus has been so well provided for that he need not go far for food. He just opens his mouth and the rivers (so it appears) bring it to him. (The plural refers to the branches of the Nile). Hippopotami actually come up to forage, mostly at night. But during the daytime, too, they can be seen grazing in swampy ground near the river. Mistaken notions about the hippopotamus may have come from a traveler, who would not, after all, get too close.

For the Egyptians, the hippopotamus was an embodiment of Seth, who represented chaos and hostility and was ritually defeated by Pharaoh, the Living Horus⁶. There is no evidence that this myth was known in Israel, but it too could have been brought by a traveler. This mythic background would explain Behemoth’s pairing with Leviathan. If so, what is more significant than Behemoth’s mythic origins is the way that they have been bleached out of the picture in the Theophany. All Behemoth does here is stand in the river and graze imperturbably⁷.

Hippopotami are actually quite dangerous, especially when they come to feed. Still, hippopotami spend most of the day in the river among the reeds with little movement and may seem placid to a passer-by. They rarely attack without provocation. The one portrayed in Job does not fight at all, though he is so powerful that “his maker” — alone — can “bring his sword near” (40,19b)⁸.

⁴ Behemoth’s tail is not actually said to be long. Rather, Behemoth is said to do something to his tail — חפץ, an obscure verb — like a cedar (as noted by KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, 131). Some suggest that “tail” is a euphemism for penis; see M.H. POPE, *Job*. Introduction, Translation, and Notes (AB; New York 1965) 325, and N. HABEL, *The Book of Job* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA 1985) 566. But the evidence for this is slight.

⁵ Herodotus, *History* 2.71; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, VIII 95.

⁶ Behemoth is identified as Seth by E. RUPRECHT, “Das Nilpferd im Hiob-buch”, *VT* 21 (1971) 209-231. KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, 127-141, observes that both the hippopotamus and the crocodile embody Seth and thus represent evil or evildoers.

⁷ Less likely is John Day’s identification of Behemoth as Arš, “El’s calf”, known from KTU 1.6 VI. There is no evidence for this identification, nor can we say that this creature conforms to Job 40,15-24 better than the hippopotamus does, since we have no idea what Arš looked like or how it spent its time.

⁸ We should redivide עשו אל as אלה עשו (“... of God. His maker may near bring his sword”), to eliminate the ungrammatical article of העשוי.

Job 40,24 may be an unmarked rhetorical question, as it is almost always translated: “Can one take him by his eyes, by barbs pierce his nose?” This would mean that humans cannot capture the hippopotamus *even* by means of hooks in his eyes and nose. Or the sentence may be indicative: “By his eyes one can take him, by barbs pierce his nose”. This means that humans can do so. Hippopotami were often hunted in Egypt. Though it is possible that the author did not know this, the specificity of 40,24 suggests actual knowledge, for hippopotami were indeed caught with ropes and hooks in the nose and barbed harpoons⁹. In this case, the verse is not describing human helplessness before this creature but only its strength, which allows it to be subdued only in this brutal fashion and not in direct combat. If so, Behemoth resembles the powerful but mortal war horse.

On the grounds that the author could be expected to know that hippopotami are vulnerable to human attack, O. Keel argues that Behemoth is not the natural hippopotamus but rather the hippopotamus as the mythological symbol of evil: Seth, undefeatable by humans¹⁰. It seems to me, however, that while an Israelite might be aware of the basic symbolism of the hippopotamus to the Egyptians, the distinction that Keel draws would require a deeper understanding — and acceptance — of the Egyptian myth in its particulars, as well as the ability to distinguish between the Seth-hippopotamus¹¹ and the identical creatures hunted by humans¹². Moreover, the hippopotami in the ritual scenes are depicted as ludicrously small before Pharaoh. An Egyptian would realize that these proportions represent the supremacy of Pharaoh/Horus, but an Israelite chancing upon such a portrayal would not come away with awe at the hippopotamus’s might. Nor could the author assume that his readers would be aware of the subtleties of the myth, apply it to a battle between Yahweh and Seth, and then be shaken by reference to the human inability to defeat this divinity. In any case, even the Egyptians do not seem to have been troubled by the existence of the chaotic god Seth, since his defeat by Horus was certain and re-enacted ritually. It is most probable that the Theophany describes a real hippopotamus, whose natural powers are enough to inspire awe.

⁹ The hunt is described in T. SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH, *On Egyptian Representations of Hippopotamus Hunting as a Religious Motive* (Stockholm 1953) 11–14. For illustrations see KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, plates 74, 75b and 76. I can find no depictions of attacks on the hippopotamus’s eyes.

¹⁰ Ibid., 132. Specifically, the ritual depictions adduced are Ptolemaic.

¹¹ Ibid., Abb. 73.

¹² Hunts by non-royal persons are found in 18th dynasty Theban tombs. They are based on royal traditions but show private individuals hunting. Early scenes show real hippopotamus hunts with several individuals and hippopotami. See SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH, *On Egyptian Representations*, 15, 11–12, 24. See also KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, Abb. 74, in which two men harpoon three hippopotami.

2. *Leviathan* (Job 40,25-41,26)

Leviathan is usually identified with the crocodile or, less often, with the dragon of Ugaritic and Hebrew mythology¹³. In my view, the Leviathan in the Theophany of Job is based on the whale, perhaps conflated with the closely related dolphin. The identification of Leviathan with the whale, famous from Moby Dick, was advocated by earlier commentators, such as Thomas Aquinas (*Expositio in Job ad litteram*, ad loc.), but in the twentieth century only by G. R. Driver¹⁴. The ancient Mediterranean was home to whales, including the fin whale (up to 18,5 meters and 80 tons in males) and the sperm whale (up to 18,5 meters and 70 tons in males)¹⁵. Even today, in spite of severe over-hunting, whales are occasionally spotted in this sea¹⁶.

In this passage in Job, the whale is described as it would have appeared to amazed seafarers. These are the men who are called “those who go down to the sea in ships” in Ps 107,23-24 and are said to report God’s wonders in the depths. These wonders, according to Ps 104,26, include Leviathan. Ben Sira, too, writes that “those who go down to the sea” tell of its wonders, namely God’s amazing creatures and “the power of Rahab” (Sir 43,24-25).

Ancient zoological taxonomy was vastly different from our own, especially when naming creatures known only from afar. Leviathan could be imagined variously in images drawn from vague sightings of actual animals and composed of parts of other animals, such as a serpent’s coiling or a crocodile’s scales (the latter perhaps the basis of Leviathan’s “armor” in 41,6-8)¹⁷.

Until modern times, whales were often conflated with other large sea creatures, including sharks. Even in recent times, and even after beached whales had been observed, whales were often depicted in fantastic and monstrous guises¹⁸. J. Roman observes that “[f]or much of recorded history,

¹³ KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, 143-156, identifies Leviathan with the crocodile, but as a supernatural manifestation of Seth, alongside the hippopotamus.

¹⁴ G.R. DRIVER, *Mythical Monsters in the Old Testament* (Rome 1956) 240-242, speaking only of Job 40,25-30. The rest of 40,15-41,26 he assigns to a crocodile. Elsewhere the word can refer to any large sea serpent (ibid., 242).

¹⁵ See P.G.H. EVANS, *The Natural History of Whales & Dolphins* (Christopher Helm Mammal Series; London 1987) 60-69; 93-94. For technical data on cetaceans currently in the Mediterranean, see E. HOYT, *Marine Protected Areas for Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises. A World Handbook for Cetacean Habitat Conservation* (London 2005) 130-161.

¹⁶ A number of web sites report on current whale distribution, e.g.: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/2478/0>.

¹⁷ The whale as imagined in one medieval depiction has scales — see J. ROMAN, *Whale* (Animal; London 2006) 16 — as does the one shown at <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast282.htm>.

¹⁸ See the pictures in ROMAN, *Whale*, 16-25.

there was little cosmological distinction between a sea monster, a cetacean or a great fish”¹⁹. In any case, the distinction between mythological and natural beings is a modern one. The creatures mentioned in Isa 13,21 and 34,14, for example, include real animals and demons, all of them assumed to actually reside in the desert. For that matter, medieval and early modern mariners who described sea serpents considered them natural creatures. (Most likely they were seeing giant squids or other sea creatures.) The inaccuracies in descriptions of monstrous but actual beasts do not prove that they are mythological, only that they were not well known. Artists based their depictions based on stock legends and components of more familiar animals. Leviathan in the Theophany is not identical either to the crocodile or to the whale, but taken as a whole the picture is far closer to the latter.

Leviathan, like the whale but not the crocodile, is a denizen of the sea and its depths (Job 41,23). The whale, not the crocodile, memorably “sneezes,” shooting a spout that can be said to glow when the sun shines through it (41,10a). The spout can be imagined as smoke or steam coming from his nostrils (41,12). Nothing of the crocodile even vaguely resembles a spout of smoke. Of course the picture of Leviathan is enhanced beyond the natural when the poet tells of flames shooting from his nose and mouth (41,11.13). But the whale alone can stir up the depths or whip up the abyss into a boiling froth (41,23) — as cetaceans memorably do by leaping and crashing back into the water — or leave a white wake (נחב) behind it (41,24). Crocodiles, in sharp contrast, glide smoothly and almost undetectably though the water and emerge in an instant.

Nor is Leviathan in the Theophany the chaos monster known from Northwest Semitic mythology, though that is the idea of Leviathan that Job himself holds (3,9). Leviathan in the Theophany is incompatible with what we know of the mythical monster, which had multiple heads (Ps 74,14; KTU 1.5 I 3) and was serpentine (Isa 27,1).

The Leviathan of Psalm 104,26 is clearly a cetacean: שם אניית יהלכון לוייתן זה-יצרת לשחק-בו. By a complex pun on לוייתן — which can mean “Leviathan” or “their escort”²⁰ — this sentence has a double meaning: “There [in the great sea] ships travel, (and) Leviathan, whom you created to play with”; and “There ships travel, (and) their escort, which you created to play therein”. Leviathan is shown both as a sea creature with which God “plays” — perhaps in an aggressive fashion (see Job 40,29) — and as one of the animals that accompany ships in apparent playfulness, as

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

²⁰ לוייתן means “escort” in Rabbinic Hebrew. Though the noun is not found in Biblical Hebrew, it is a standard nominal formation from לוי and would have been easily understandable in earlier times. The pun is consonantal and visual, not primarily aural, because “their escort” would be vocalized לוייתן.

some cetaceans do. In the psalm, לִירִיחַ has become one of God's playful creatures, not a primordial monster and not at all a threat to civilization.

The rhetorical questions pointing out what Job cannot do (40,25-31) are not meant to recall Yahweh's deeds in his mythical battle against Leviathan. In earlier Canaanite mythology it was Baal who fights the monster. Baal uses a club to smash (*mḥš*) his enemies (KTU 1.2 IV 23, etc.) and smite (*mḥš*) Leviathan (KTU 1.3 III 38; KTU 1.5 I 1). Yahweh similarly defeats his aquatic foes by club and sword — “smashing” (מַחֵץ), “shattering” (שֹׁבֵר), “scattering” (פֹּרֵץ, פֶּרֶץ), “cleaving” (בֹּקֵעַ), and “piercing” (חֹלֵל) them (Isa 51,9; Pss 74,13-15; 89,11). The mythical Leviathan was not, according to the extant myths, enslaved by covenant (Job 40,28) nor did he have his carcass cut up and sold (40,30) — a notion out of place in the primordial context. And 40,29 certainly cannot imply that Yahweh puts his daughters on a leash (like a pet bird)! Nor are these things true of the whale — or the crocodile, though the hunting techniques described in 41,25-26.31 are reminiscent of the ways Egyptians hunted crocodiles²¹. In these verses the author is making the point that the techniques that can be used even against the crocodile will fail against this Leviathan.

The incompatible images in Job 40,25-32 are not based on a single myth but simply remind Job, in various ways, that man's most effective hunting techniques cannot subdue Leviathan. Yahweh, as Leviathan's creator, could do so, but he never says that he does. That is just not part of what is described here. We are to be awed, not intimidated, by this picture.

3. God and His Creatures

The God of the Theophany takes pleasure in his creatures, even the two that came with mythological connotations of evil. He shows a certain affectionate possessiveness when he says of Behemoth: “Look at Behemoth, whom I made as I made you” (40,15a)²² and “He is the first of God's ways” (40,19a); and of Leviathan: “Under the entire heaven he is mine” (41,3b), that is to say, he is no one's creature but God's. As Newsom says, “[a]lthough God's ability to overcome them [sc. Behemoth and Leviathan] is taken for granted, there is little or no reference to enmity or hostility between God and these creatures. Instead, God describes them with evident admiration”²³. God cares for these creatures enough to have provided them with armor and powers that shield them from attack. (Even though, if, as proposed above, 40,24 is in the indicative mood, Behemoth's inviolability is not absolute.)

²¹ See KEEL, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, 142.

²² עִמָּךְ can mean either “like you” (HALOT, 839.2.2b) or “with you” (at the time of creation).

²³ C.A. NEWSOM, *The Book of Job. A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York 2003) 249.

Leviathan's traditional association with chaos is simply left out of this picture, as is Behemoth's, assuming that the latter was originally a chaos monster. The beasts of Job 40-41 are awesome, powerful, and dangerous but not particularly aggressive. Leviathan in particular is mighty and frightening — to whomever would attack it. The author emphasizes its independence and loftiness and the way it displays the splendor of God's artistry.

God's artistry and the impunity of many of his creatures to human powers are on display in other creatures described in the Theodicy. In the case of a lion, which is dangerous to humans (though by no means indomitable), Yahweh's question, "Do you hunt prey for the lion, and fill the young lion's appetite?" (38,39), is such as to emphasize God's care for that creature rather than the danger it presents to man. The war-horse is described from the standpoint of its fearlessness, that is to say, indifference to human assault or control. Hence the questions in 39,19-20: "Do you give the horse (its) might? Do you dress its neck with a mane? Do you make it as noisy as locusts, with the majesty of its neighing being a terror?" Not: Can you kill a horse? — which humans can do. In the case of the wild buffalo, a creature powerful but not evil, the salient feature is its refusal to serve man (39,9-10). The real issue is creativity: God alone has the craft, which is to say, the wisdom, to form such creatures. As in the case of the other creatures, the hostility and evil of the mythological Leviathan and Behemoth are left in the background. As the Theophany portrays them, they seem indifferent to humans rather than aggressive. As Yahweh describes the world, man is not the focus of divine energy, not even as an object of enmity.

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SUMMARY

Scholarly consensus with regard to Behemoth and Leviathan in Job 40,15-24 and 40,25-41,26 emphasizes the evil and danger inherent in both. Behemoth is usually identified as the hippopotamus and Leviathan as the crocodile or a mythological dragon. The present article accepts the former identification but argues that Leviathan in the Theophany (as in Psalm 104,26) is based on the whale. The Theophany marginalizes the evil and dangers of the beasts. The author has left their hostility and violence in the background and has made them less aggressive and menacing, though still powerful, indomitable, and awesome.