

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

LOTAN AND LEVIATHAN

by CHARLES F. PFEIFFER

DR. PFEIFFER is Associate Professor of Old Testament in Gordon Divinity School, Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, and author of a number of aids to Bible study. In this paper he compares the Ugaritic monster Lotan with the Biblical Leviathan, and gives an interesting account of the part they play in early Semitic and later Jewish imagination.

TO the ancient Semite, a god and the phenomenon which he represented were designated by one and the same word. Shemesh was either the sun god, or the sun itself. The Hebrew word for sea is *yam*, but the same word in Canaanite mythology represents a God who is associated with the sea. It is noteworthy that the Israelites, with their rigid monotheism, stated that all things, including sun, moon, and stars, were made by Yahweh. To them, Shemesh could only mean the sun.

The Hebrew writings, however, were not produced in a cultural vacuum. Poetic patterns, grammatical usage, and even literary motifs were the common heritage of the Semitic peoples, including the Biblical Hebrews. Some of these received later expansion and adaptation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is particularly true of the seven-headed Canaanite monster Lotan, the Biblical Leviathan.

I. IN BIBLICAL TIMES

Psalm 74 calls to remembrance the mighty acts of Yahweh at the time of the Exodus. The Psalmist addresses the Lord: "Thou didst divide the sea (*yam*) by thy might, thou didst break the heads of the dragons (*tanninim*) on the waters, thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness" (Psalm 74: 13-14). Here the Red Sea is personified. Its waters are the enemies of God and His people. God destroyed the enemy, opened the waters of the sea, and enabled His people to pass over on dry ground. So decisive is the victory that creatures of the wilderness feed upon the remains of the defeated foe.

The God who manifests Himself in nature is praised in Psalm 104. Many of the lines of this Psalm echo the "Hymn to the Aton" written in Egypt during the reign of Akhenaton (1380-1362 B.C.). Verses 25-26 read: "Yonder is the sea, great and

wide, which teems with things innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan which thou didst form to sport in it".

In this peaceful scene Leviathan is not a foe to be defeated, but God's creature to be admired, even as he sports in the sea. Here Leviathan appears to be a crocodile, or other marine creature.

Afflicted Job would not curse God, but he did curse the day of his birth. In anguish he cried out, "Let those curse it who curse the day, who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan" (Job 3: 8, R.S.V.). The traditional rendering "who are ready to raise up their mourning" (K.J.V.) misses the reference to Leviathan which is obvious in the original.

Many ancients believed that an eclipse occurred when a dragon swallowed the sun or the moon. If only some enchanter had aroused Leviathan, the monster himself might have obliterated the day of Job's birth, thus relieving him of his many troubles!

The fullest Biblical description of Leviathan is given in Job 41 (English; 40: 25 ff., Hebrew). As in Psalm 104, the description here is of a living creature, probably the crocodile, familiar in the Nile and evidently known in Palestine in antiquity.

Isaiah makes reference to Leviathan in a prophetic passage depicting the future victory of God over His foes: "In that day Yahweh with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea" (27: 1). One of the tablets from Canaanite Ras Shamra (67: 1: 1) describes Lotan in almost identical words: "When thou hast smitten Lotan, the fleeing serpent (and) hast put to an end the tortuous serpent, the mighty one with seven heads". In the Ras Shamra texts it is Baal rather than Yahweh who is the foe of Lotan/Leviathan. Isaiah was, of course, a strict monotheist. He did, however, draw upon the common stock of poetic imagery known to his people, just as contemporary writers allude to mythology to illustrate a point without thereby expressing or encouraging faith in the story so used.

II. IN LATER JUDAISM

The motif of the victory of Yahweh over Leviathan frequently appears in rabbinical literature. The Book of Enoch (60: 7-10) contains a creation myth describing two monsters: "a female monster named Leviathan, to dwell in the abysses of the ocean over the fountains of the waters" and "the male . . . named Behemoth . . . who occupied . . . a waste wilderness . . . on the east of the garden where the elect and righteous dwell".

According to the Jewish Midrash, Leviathan was created on the fifth day. Male and female forms of the monster were created, but God slew the female lest the species should multiply and destroy the world. Her flesh was reserved for the banquet that will be given to the righteous at the advent of the Messiah.

A puritanical variation appears in the comments of Rabbi Judah bar Simon who declared that those who had not taken part in pagan sports would be allowed to participate in the hunting of the Leviathan and the Behemoth. Another version states that Gabriel will be charged with the killing of the monster, but that he will be unable to accomplish the task without the help of God.

A particularly imaginative version of the story concerns Jonah and the whale. At creation God made a fish intended to harbour Jonah. The prophet was as comfortable inside the fish as if he were in a spacious synagogue. The eyes of the fish served as windows. Light was provided by a diamond which illuminated not only the inside of the whale but also the sea on the outside, down to the very bottom.

The sea creatures were so created that, when their allotted time had come, they went to Leviathan who would devour them. While Jonah was in the whale's belly he was told that this was about to happen. The whale, with Jonah inside, approached Leviathan, whereupon Jonah said: "For thy sake I came hither. It was meet that I should know thine abode, for it is my appointed task to capture thee in the life to come and slaughter thee for the table of the just and pious". Leviathan fled in terror, so that Jonah and the whale were saved. The whale thereupon took Jonah on a guided tour of places that would interest a prophet: the river from which the ocean flows, the place where the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Gehenna, Sheol and many other wonderful places.

Jonah was quite comfortable and could hardly be expected to desire a change in his conditions. However God, who had work for the prophet to do, sent a female fish with three hundred and sixty-five thousand little fish to Jonah's host, demanding that the prophet be surrendered. Otherwise she threatened to swallow both the whale and his guest! Leviathan corroborated the story, stating that he had heard God despatch the female fish on her errand. Thereupon Jonah was transferred to the female fish. His new quarters, shared with all the little fish, were so crowded that he prayed for deliverance. When he got to the words "I shall redeem my vow", God caused the fish to spew out Jonah.

It accords with the use of folklore to find such stories as that of

Behemoth adapted to differing situations. At one moment Leviathan is a monster defeated by God millennia ago, at another he is still very much alive and awaiting a future doom. He may be used as a personification of the forces of evil, present or future. In the Book of the Revelation the epitome of evil is seen in the dragon (Rev. 12: 9). The beast with "ten horns and seven heads" arising from the sea (Rev. 13: 1) is reminiscent of the seven-headed Lotan of the Ras Shamra tablets. Here, devoid of the excesses of rabbinical midrash, the seer of Patmos envisions the final victory of God as one in which a "dragon" or "beast" is destroyed as the prelude to an age of everlasting bliss.

*Gordon Divinity School,
Beverly Farms, Mass.*