
Term Paper

*From Sea Battles to String-Puppets:
Leviathan, Creation and Theodicy in the Book of Job*

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Yahweh's answer to Job has been the source of countless debates and critical readings over the centuries, and nothing has perplexed scholars as much as the fact that, instead of ending with an accounting for His apparent injustices, Yahweh ends with a lengthy poetic description of the sea monster Leviathan. It seems a "noble irrelevance," as George Bernard Shaw famously dismissed it,¹ and the reader is both drawn to the passage's majesty and repelled by its obscurity. In the following pages I will present a new reading of this passage, based on Job's uses of Rahab and Leviathan and their roots in ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian texts. It is my contention that these uses in Job represent not just leftover references to earlier tales, but rather deliberate reworkings of the chaoskampf myth into a radical new formulation of the problem of suffering in absolute monotheism. I will first examine the ancient sources of Rahab and Leviathan, highlighting the Biblical parallels. I will then trace ways in which the Biblical uses fail to cohere with the ancient traditions, culminating in a more detailed look at Job's innovative treatment of the sea monster archetype.²

1 Wolfers, 474.

2 This paper will leave untreated the prose prologue and epilogue of the book of Job, mainly because they contain no reference to (or direct bearing on) Rahab or Leviathan, but also because I follow Levenson (154) in seeing these passages as the work of a different author. The text I deal with begins with Job cursing his own birth and ends with his repentance in dust and ashes.

I. Ancient Near Eastern Sources

Before digging down to the ancient texts, it is important to clarify the identity of the figures we wish to excavate: Rahab and Leviathan are, simply put, two different names for a serpent-like sea creature which Yahweh is variously said to have cut into pieces (Isa. 51:9),³ crushed like a carcass (Ps. 89:10), struck down with understanding (Job 26:12), punished (Isa. 27:1), crushed the heads of (Ps. 74:14), and formed to sport in the sea (Ps. 104:26). I largely follow John Day in treating the two as alternative names for the same creature - Rahab (Job 26:13) and Leviathan (Isa. 27:1) are both names given to “the twisting serpent”⁴ - with the important qualification that each word has its own history, and only Leviathan’s (ltn., Lotan, Litan) has been successfully traced to ancient Canaanite texts, most notably the Ugaritic narrative poem known as the Baal Cycle. In the Ugaritic stories, the storm god Baal is delivered the following message by his foe Mot (Death): “When you killed Litan,⁵ the Fleeing Serpent, Annihilated the Twisty Serpent, The Potentate with Seven Heads, The heavens grew hot, they withered.”⁶ Here we see many descriptive similarities with the Biblical Leviathan, from the many heads in Ps. 74:14 to both “fleeing serpent” and “twisting serpent” in Isa. 27:1 (Job 26:13 also refers to the slaying of a “fleeing serpent,” this time called Rahab).

The stories behind both Leviathan and Rahab find dramatic parallel in another passage from the Baal cycle, in which Baal’s beloved Anat speaks of her many conquests: “Surely I fought Yamm [ym, sea], the Beloved of El, Surely I finished off River, the Great God, Surely I bound Tunnan [tnn, dragon] and destroyed him. I fought the Twisty Serpent, The Potentate with Seven Heads.”⁷ Besides containing much of the account of Litan (ascribed to Baal) quoted above, Anat’s speech is useful for our purposes because it describes both a battle with the sea and a battle with a sea dragon in the same breath; as we’ll see with Tiamat below, the personifications of primordial chaos often blur between sea and dragon, partly due to the fluidity between the root words and their employment (in its discussion of Tannin/Tunnan, the Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible asks, “are tnn, ltn and ym sep-

3 All biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation, except where otherwise noted.

4 Day, 39.

5 This is the same text that Heidel describes to be from Ras Shamra (107). He translates the name “Lotan” but the root ltn. is the same, which Day (4) shows to be the source of the name Leviathan.

6 Parker, 141. Binger makes the case that here, as elsewhere in the story, the true dragon-slayer is Baal’s beloved Anat.

7 Parker, 111.

arate monsters or different names/epithets for the same being?”).⁸ Anat claims she bound Tunnan before destroying him, echoing the omnipresent ancient Near Eastern myth of the binding of the waters; as we’ll see below, Job’s monsters have been bound as well, but crucially have not yet been destroyed. Anat has a great propensity for monster-slaying, and she is later depicted spreading the remains of slain Mot (Death) as fertilizer for the next season’s crops.⁹ This is echoed in Ps. 74:14, which says Yahweh gave Leviathan as food for the people/creatures of the wilderness (manna for the Israelites?); in both texts, the original battle of creation is linked with the yearly creation of food.

The Mesopotamian epic *Enuma Elish* describes the slaying of sea-goddess Tiamat by the storm god Marduk, in a creation battle most often associated with Genesis 1 due to the following passage: “The Lord rested, and inspected her corpse. He divided the monstrous shape and created marvels (from it). He sliced her in half like a fish for drying; half of her he put up to roof the sky, drew a bolt across and made a guard hold it.”¹⁰ The battle between Marduk and Tiamat was central to the notion of *chaoskampf*, the emerging pattern of stories describing a battle between a god and the sea that led from chaos to creation. Leaving aside the ongoing debate about whether or not each Biblical instance necessarily implies a creation story, the slaying of Tiamat holds many parallels with the Biblical Rahab and Leviathan. For instance, Ps. 89:10 tells Yahweh “You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm,” while Marduk “threw down [Tiamat’s] corpse...he broke up her regiments; her assembly was scattered.”¹¹ Tiamat’s defeat is followed by the submission of her allies to Marduk: “Then the gods her helpers, who had marched at her side, Began to tremble...They were thrown into the net and sat there ensnared. They cowered back, filled with woe.”¹² Job 9:13 contains the similar allusion “God will not turn back his anger; the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him.” Marduk is said to have “pierced Tiamat’s belly” and “sliced her in half like a fish for drying,”¹³ whereas Yahweh is later reminded, “Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?” (Isa. 51:9). Although we’ve just seen four striking parallels between Tiamat and Rahab, some scholars continue

8 DDD, 1581.

9 Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 112.

10 Dalley, 254-5.

11 *Ibid.*, 253.

12 *Ibid.*, 253-4.

13 *Ibid.*, 253 and 255.

to rankle at the linkage of the sea-goddess with a sea dragon. However, as Heidel notes in his account of the debate,¹⁴ Tiamat is portrayed as both sea and dragon in the art and literature of ancient Mesopotamia, and her attempt to “devour” Marduk - eat or engulf? - highlights an ambiguity that carries over to the Biblical texts.

Turning ahead for a moment to our focal text, we can see that Yahweh’s answer to Job has its roots in the very parallels we’ve seen between Biblical and other ancient Near Eastern treatments of sea creatures. As David Wolfers first pointed out,¹⁵ many of Yahweh’s mocking questions to Job in 41:1-8¹⁶ contain references to His (and Marduk’s, Baal’s, Anat’s, etc.) own battles. The references to catching Leviathan with a fishhook (41:1), harpoons or fishing spears (41:7) correspond to the piercing of dragons we’ve seen in Isa. 51:9, Job 26:13 and Enuma Elish.¹⁷ The “supplications” and “soft words” of 41:3 can be found in the groveling helpers of Rahab (Job 9:13) and Tiamat. The introduction of a covenant to be taken as Yahweh’s servant in 41:4 extends the “groveling helpers” allusion to cover the Biblical covenant to never again flood the earth, echoing in turn the creation-act binding of waters found in Genesis and Enuma Elish. The references to putting Leviathan on a leash or playing with it like a bird (41:5) allude to Ps. 104:26, “the Leviathan that you formed to sport in the sea,” which has thus far found no antecedent in other texts and will be discussed further in the next section. Finally, Yahweh asks Job if traders will divide Leviathan up among the merchants (41:6), echoing the physical divisions of Rahab (Isa. 51:9) and Tiamat. As Wolfers summarizes, “the Lord in this passage is taunting Job with twisted versions of his own accomplishments against Leviathan-Rahab-Yam-Nahar;”¹⁸ when Yahweh concludes “Lay hands on it; think of the battle; you will not do it again!” (41:8) it is as if to say “I did all this and created it all as well, you speck of dust!”

II. Biblical Divergences from the Sources

Although the many similarities between Biblical accounts of Rahab/Leviathan and ancient accounts of Litan, Yamm and Tiamat are striking, the few differences are more crucial. Isa. 27:1, as we’ve seen, contains language remarkably similar to both Canaanite and Mesopotamian texts, with one important difference: “On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.” The traditional events

14 Heidel, 83-88.

15 Wolfers, 490-1.

16 The Hebrew Bible and many commentators number this section 40:25-32, but for consistency’s sake I’ve stayed with the NRSV.

17 Dalley, 253.

18 Wolfers, 491.

and character are here described in the future tense, and this apocalyptic formulation transforms Leviathan/Rahab from a conquered foe (contained sea, bound sky, crop fertilizer) into a still-twisting threat. This puts humanity in a different position as well; whereas before we could simply sing the praises of Yahweh's supreme victory and security, now we have to worry about a living chaos and wonder why Yahweh waits to destroy it.

Two of the Biblical uses of Rahab are so divergent as to seem politically motivated. In Ps. 87:4 Rahab is mentioned along with Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia as a foreign land outside the walls of Yahweh's chosen Zion, and Isa. 30:7 declares that "Egypt's help is worthless and empty, therefore I have called her 'Rahab who sits still.'"¹⁹ Here Rahab is the traditional conquered (if not destroyed) foe of Yahweh transposed into geopolitical terms as a foreign land, possibly a foreign land which spawned such a polytheistic myth. For Wolfers, who sees Yahweh's entire second answer to Job (the lengthy descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan) as the political equation {(Behemoth=Job=Judah) attacked by (Leviathan=Sennacherib=Assyria)},²⁰ such a transposition was a natural expression of the conditions under which Biblical texts were often written: "The periodic hostility which Israel suffered from the pagan empires with which it was surrounded was always seen as a manifestation of the divine purpose, and Leviathan was employed as a metaphor for the transmission of power between God and them."²¹ In the book of Job, I would add, the looming specter of attack became an act of Yahweh not due to a failing of the Israelites' faith (as in the Deuteronomical-history books) but due to the creator's own mysterious whimsy.

As an indication of this whimsy, Ps. 104:26 indicates that Yahweh formed Leviathan to sport in the sea; this not only finds no parallel in ancient traditions, it reverses several key features. First, while in Enuma Elish Marduk and the other gods could be said to be creations (offspring) of Tiamat and Apsu²², the Biblical account has Yahweh create the sea monster. Second, the paradigm of *chaoskampf* becomes *chaosspiel*: not only is there no battle and no destruction of the adversary, the "adversary" itself is a toy created for the fun of it! As we'll see, this difference between polytheistic power struggle and monotheistic creation will have especially dire ramifications in the book of Job.

19 Day translates this as "Rahab who is silenced," to similar effect.

20 Wolfers, 492.

21 Ibid., 493.

22 Coogan, 456.

III. Divergences Cohere in Job

Most of the significant Biblical divergences from ancient sea monster traditions can be found in Job's Leviathan. Job mentions Leviathan almost immediately in his first lament (3:8), asking "those who are skilled to raise up Leviathan" to join him in cursing his birth, in order to blot it out. Thus Job's wish for non-existence makes use of the not-yet-destroyed Leviathan, whom he calls on to darken the dawn of his birth. Here Job sees Leviathan as an agent of darkness, but it is a darkness of void more than horror or evil - in fact, this darkness stands as a possible nullification of the suffering in his life. Job soon compares himself to a sea creature by asking, "Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?" (7:12). Beyond just wishing for the escape a live Leviathan could offer, Job begins to identify himself with such a creature: he is caught, suffering, to be neither released nor destroyed. This identification between Job and Rahab/Leviathan, rarely explicit, becomes more richly layered later in the text, as the picture of Job as a plaything of Yahweh emerges alongside 41:5 (and Ps. 104:26). As Job becomes more and more confused as to why he suffers unjustly, the implicit identification with Rahab continues: "By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down Rahab" (26:12). While it is understanding that Job desires from Yahweh, he knows it will never be granted; the omniscience of Yahweh seems to Job violent enough to be confounded with sea-battle.

Yahweh first addresses Job with a series of sarcastic "who do you think you are?" questions that describe Yahweh's own magnificence. The binding of the sea is one of the first feats Yahweh mentions: "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?-when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band[...]" (38:8-9). As Jon Levenson notes, this account falls somewhere between ancient accounts of *chaoskampf* sea-battle and the peaceful sweeping of Yahweh's wind over the waters of the deep (Gen. 1:2): "Rather, we have a sense of the Sea as a somewhat sinister force that, left to its own, would submerge the world and forestall the ordered reality we call creation. What prevents this frightening possibility is the mastery of YHWH."²³ Here we can see many of the Biblical divergences from tradition - Leviathan/Rahab as not-yet-destroyed (Isa. 27:1), as a whimsical creation of Yahweh (Ps. 104:26, Job 41:5), as a symbol of mankind's own position (Job 3:8, 7:12, 26:12) - begin to cohere into an overall literary sense of dread and anxiety. Yahweh's first speech (38:8-11) provides the precarious image of held-back waters about to engulf all into chaos again, and his second speech (40:6-41:34) makes it clear that this is no great struggle at all for him: Leviathan, like Job and the rest of the universe, is at the mercy of its creator.

23 Levenson, 15.

IV. Yahweh's Speech on Leviathan

Before delving into this second speech, it is worthwhile to take another look at Yahweh's first speech for its allusions to Job's own lamentations. There are many of the same phrases in 38:8-11 that we saw in 3:5-10, such as "thick darkness," "garment/swaddling band," "clouds" and "shut womb," and hence Yahweh's boast of his sea-battle clearly addresses Job's first lamentation of his own birth. For example, Job complains that the day of his birth "did not shut the doors of my mother's womb" (3:10), so when Yahweh claims he "shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb" (38:8) it is a direct reminder to Job that Yahweh alone decides what shall and shall not be. In his second speech, Yahweh again uses the language of doors and garments in reference to the Leviathan, with Yahweh himself as the answer to the following questions: "Who can strip off its outer garment? Who can penetrate its double coat of mail? Who can open the doors of its face? There is terror all around its teeth" (41:13-14). Wolfers²⁴ interprets this parallel language to mean that Yahweh claims to have already freed Leviathan, but I read this as Yahweh merely hinting at the possibility, holding his pet Leviathan precariously over the still-in-check waters, held aloft (41:34a) as a reminder to our hubris (41:34b) just how close we are to chaos and terror.

Levenson reads a similar precarious tone in Yahweh's mention of a covenant with Leviathan (41:4), linked to the threat of flood behind his first covenant: "Creation endures because God has pledged in an eternal covenant that it shall endure and because he has, also in an eternal covenant, compelled the obeisance of his great adversary. If either covenant (or are they one?) comes undone, creation disappears."²⁵ Thus Job's dread and unexplained suffering cast a suspicious light on Yahweh's promise to his creation. Levenson concludes that these passages display a fear that Yahweh's victory over the sea may be reversed, that he may be defeated.²⁶ However, read in the light of the Biblical divergences from tradition (Isa. 27:1, Ps. 104:26, and Job 3:8, 7:12, 26:12, 38:8-11 and 41:1-34), we see that Job does not suggest the fear that Yahweh may be defeated by another (Rahab, Leviathan, the sea, or other gods) - his monotheistic majesty is absolute and unchallenged. Rather, Job introduces the anxiety that the all-powerful Yahweh may simply break his promise, letting his plaything loose for sport, destroying creation as whimsically as he destroyed Job's home and family. In Job we see the first real extrapolation of absolute monotheism into theodicy, the problem of how to account for evil and suffering in a world where Yahweh controls all without struggle. The precariousness of existence - foreign invasion, war, sickness, even exile - won't disappear with monotheism, so it must be formulated in a new way. (In the prologue and epi-

²⁴ Wolfers, 497. For Wolfers the freed Leviathan represents a further political allusion to an attack on Judah by the Assyrians.

²⁵ Levenson, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

logue added to Job there is an attempt to soften the problem of evil in monotheism through the framing device of a pseudo-polytheistic wager, in which Yahweh retains control without struggle but escapes responsibility; Satan becomes the malicious one, and Yahweh's restoration of Job's life lets all be right with the world once again.)

Yahweh's second speech has not ceased to cause such anxiety and consternation in its readers. As Day outlines,²⁷ scholars have tried every trick in the book to dismiss the concluding description of Leviathan as either harmless or inauthentic. For the former, many continue to insist that Leviathan is simply a crocodile, hippo or even dolphin,²⁸ despite the passages of unambiguously mythological traits such as fire-breathing (41:19-21), not to mention the multiple allusions to other ancient stories outlined above. Still other scholars employ a different tack, arguing that the second speech is inauthentic and must have been added later, because Job has already repented, it's not a classical conclusion or it simply makes no sense in this context.²⁹ These latter protestations are certainly understandable given the confounding nature of the passage, but they completely fail to account for the many specific allusions we've seen in Yahweh's second speech (41:13-14) to his first speech (38:8-11) and to Job's first lamentation (3:3-10).

As we've seen, Yahweh begins his description of Leviathan with a series of allusions to his own victory in chaoskampf traditions (41:1-8). After Yahweh exclaims to Job to "remember the battle," there follows a passage that has caused much debate among translators and critics: "Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it? No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up. Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe? -under the whole heaven, who?" (41:9-11). Much as the verses preceding it, this continues Yahweh's boast of his own victories through a description of the Leviathan. However, as the NRSV here strays from the Hebrew,³⁰ I turn to the Tanakh translation for the last verse (49:11): "Who then can stand before me? Who will challenge me whom I will not requite, for everything under heaven is mine."³¹ This is obviously a crucial difference, concerning Leviathan in one instance and Yahweh himself in another. The translators continue to debate, but I suggest that the ambiguity is telling and possibly even intentional, as the line between Yahweh and his creation Leviathan blurs. As Wolfers notes, this passage "is a resounding affirmation of the Lord's complete control of Leviathan (and so also of good and

27 Day, 65-70.

28 Ibid., 65-68

29 Ibid., 69-70.

30 Clifford, 195.

31 Ibid., 195.

evil),”³² and I would suggest that such complete control over his creation makes Yahweh suspect in Job’s radical monotheism: if Leviathan is just a puppet or aspect of Yahweh, how can its terrors not be attributable to its creator? The text produces as much fear as suspicion of Yahweh through his creation: “Out of [Leviathan’s] nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth” (41:20-21). Compare this with 2 Samuel’s description of Yahweh: “Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him” (2 Sam. 22:9). Such close parallels beg one of the fundamental questions behind the book of Job: is Yahweh’s horrific concluding speech a description of Leviathan or Yahweh himself, or are they one and the same?

Returning to the three-part parallel of Yahweh’s two speeches and Job’s lament, we recall that Job first invoked the name of Leviathan in attempt to blacken, darken or cloud over the day of his birth, blotting out the terrible light of his human suffering: “Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none; may it not see the eyelids of the morning” (3:9). In Yahweh’s conclusion, it is revealed that Leviathan provides not the sweet release of darkness but the scorching light of fire: “Its sneezes flash forth light, and its eyelids are like the eyelids of the dawn. From its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out” (41:18-19). As the description of Leviathan’s terror crescendos, Job’s own phrases come back to him: the “eyelids of the dawn/morning” that represent to him so much human misery are revealed to be the eyes of Leviathan, creature of light rather than darkness, and Yahweh forces their stare directly into Job. Leviathan is thus transformed from its origins in watery darkness and chaos (enemy of God) into a frightful bearer of God’s blinding, burning light. For Job, the intolerability of existence is represented by this light, and the revelation that there is no opposing darkness for Yahweh to contend with is anything but consoling: “He deprives of speech those who are trusted...He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light. He makes nations great, and then destroys them” (12:20, 22-23). Job’s lament of the “deep darkness” Yahweh bring to the light of life extends the inverse valuation, and when he speaks of the ignorant people groping in the dark without a light (12:25), he seems to envy them as much as he does the dead.

32 Wolfers, 495.

V. Conclusion

The roots of Yahweh's Leviathan speech clearly extend back to ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian chaoskampf stories. Tracing back from these roots shows a consistent pattern of divergence from tradition in the Biblical accounts of Rahab and Leviathan, cohering throughout the book of Job and culminating in Yahweh's speeches. The second speech, examined in detail, follows this basic progression: Yahweh browbeats Job with the invincibility of Leviathan, alluding to his own traditional and Biblical victories over the creature (41:1-8); Yahweh stresses further its invincibility, referring to both himself and the creature he controls (41:9-11); Yahweh speaks of its possible release, referring to his capture of the sea and introducing the possibility that such a capture can be reversed (41:12-14); Yahweh describes Leviathan in terms of fire and light, matching his own description and squashing Job's wish for a darkness to blot out his existence (41:18-21); finally, Yahweh proclaims his/Leviathan's unsurpassable majesty above all else, ending on the image of the creature dangling precariously above mankind as a certain cure for hubris (41:22-34). Considering Leviathan's place in Job and the Bible as a whole, Day concludes that "for some in ancient Israel the [Leviathan] mythology was living and for others it was not, and even for some of those for whom it was living Israelite monotheism had transformed it out of all recognition."³³ In considering Leviathan/Rahab's place in Job I have attempted to show precisely how the mythology was transformed by monotheism from a battle between god and sea into a psychologically deep, poetical rendering of the problem of evil and strife under a single omnipotent God.

33 Day, 189.

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