

Job: Behemoth and Leviathan

Job 40–41

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Did you ever ask yourself, Why did God make the hippopotamus?

Strange question? Yes! Especially in the context Job was in. Imagine it! Job is dying; he has suffered incalculable loss and pain. And He is asked: "Did you ever think about the hippopotamus?" You have to admit, this is a little weird.

Actually, the creature God alludes to in chapter 40 is not really a hippopotamus at all, but something called "the Behemoth." "Look at the behemoth, which I made..." (Job 40:15). Modern interpretations of this creature have tried to identify it with the hippo, but not with any great enthusiasm. Others have declared their allegiance to the rhinoceros. Older interpreters preferred to think that what God was talking about here was an elephant. Truth is, the description does not fit any of these creatures with ease.

Nor is this all. The next chapter opens with a description of something called "the Leviathan" (Job 41:1). Again, modern interpreters sometimes think this is a crocodile, whilst older ones prefer to think of it as a whale. A creature of the water certainly, but read the description of it and you will find yourself scratching your head and saying, "This is not like anything I've ever seen!"

Elephant, rhinoceros, or hippopotamus; whale, or crocodile, it doesn't really matter; all are creatures that look a little odd. You might be forgiven in thinking that they resemble something a committee might have come up with! Everything about them seems out of proportion; cartoon-like exaggerations of mysterious creatures hard to describe without raising a wry smile.

What is more puzzling is not so much the identity of Behemoth or Leviathan, but that forty-four verses should be devoted to them at this point in the story. Think about it: Job is at his wits end, and finally God has spoken! He has come with a series of about fifty questions on the nature and origin of the universe. Job has responded to this "ordeal"s for that is what it was, a trial of wisdoms by submitting to his divine opponent the response of ignorance. He simply did not know the answer to any of God's questions. Job has to confess to his limitations

as a finite human being. He cannot possibly be expected to understand God's providence any more than he can understand the complexity of the origin and behaviour of the universe in which he lives.

But, there is more to Job's dilemma. He has not only been unreasonable in his demands, asking for answers that he could not possibly have understood even if they had been given him; Job has also been sinful in his criticisms of the Almighty. Job has already lost the first round of this battle, saying: "I put my hand over my mouth... I will say no more" (Job 40:4-5). "Best of three..." we almost hear Job saying! And so he must now prepare for another round:

"Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me" (Job 40:7)

The Ultimate Challenge

C. S. Lewis noted in his book *A Grief Observed*, that we can sometimes ask questions which God finds unanswerable! Questions like, How many hours are there in a mile? "Probably half the questions we ask half our great theological and metaphysical problems are like that."(1)

But Job's problem had extended further than merely asking silly questions. Job had been angry with God. In being angry, he had entered into judgment of God and His ways. God had been placed "in the dock." Job had, in effect, set himself *above* God. He had committed man's most prevalent sin: of making himself a god. As Eden-like as this is, Job must now face a deeper reality than his ignorance. He must face up to the *sinfulness* of his response. If Job had been morally "blameless" *before* the trial, he had not been *during* it.

In what must be one of the most startling passages in this extraordinary book, God throws down the gauntlet. If Job really does can discern right and wrong, then let him extend his fury and judge accordingly.

Do you have an arm like God's,
and can your voice thunder like His?
Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor,
and clothe yourself in honor and majesty.
Unleash the fury of your wrath,
look at every proud man and bring him low,
look at every proud man and humble him,
crush the wicked where they stand.
Bury them all in the dust together;
shroud their faces in the grave.
Then I myself will admit to you

that your own right hand can save you. (Job 40:9-14)

If Job can do this, God will worship at Job's feet! Job will be acknowledged as divine.

This *reduction* of God in our minds, has been going on since Adam's time. We think we know better than God does. Not only that we know better, but that this gives us the moral edge. *We are* better than God! Somehow, in this whole business of asking moral and theological questions, we assume that our opinion is the right one. We do it all the time, putting God in the dock along with everyone and everything else. We make ourselves God, by making our moral sense the judge of everything. It is not so much our ignorance as it is our impiety that offends.

Dungeons and Dragons

Don't you think Job might have been saying to himself: "This is like a nightmare! Here I am, about to die, and God is asking me about scary animals! He cannot be serious!"

Yes, He is!

But why does God ask about *Behemoth* and *Leviathan*? And what are they exactly?

And what in the world has this to do with Job's problem?

Behemoth! We have already noted such suggestions as the elephant, or the rhinoceros, or even the hippopotamus. But the description that follows, especially of "his tail sways like a cedar" (40:17), doesn't fit any of these creatures. Henry M. Morris has made a convincing case that Behemoth represents a dinosaur, a creature now extinct but not so in Job's time. (2)

So too, Leviathan. This creature is capable of breathing out fire!

His snorting throws out flashes of light;
his eyes are like the rays of dawn.
Firebrands stream from his mouth;
sparks of fire shoot out. (41:18-19)

A fire-breathing dragon! (3)

Interesting as this is, there is another interpretation which calls for our attention. The book of Job has already used the word "Leviathan" in chapter 3. There, it seems to function as a synonym for "death" (Job 3:8). Jewish interpreters have

been almost unanimous in their interpretation of both Leviathan and Behemoth as symbolic of all that is evil. An entire mythology of evil grew using these creatures to depict it. Nor is this difficult for us to imagine. Those who love the writings of C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien are familiar enough with the genre of mythological creatures depicting forces of good and evil, whether it be *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or *The Lord of the Rings*. The Egyptians, for example, represented Seti, god of darkness, as a hippopotamus, and Canaanite myth often depicted the god of death skulking in swamps. The *Gilgamesh* epic has as its central character a bull.

Perhaps, the point of this passage is to further elucidate the point made in chapters 38 and 39. God and His ways are unknowable. What better way to reinforce that truth by asking the question: "Did you ever ask yourself why God made the hippopotamus? Or the whale?" The answer, of course, is that we have no idea. And pain is like that! We don't understand it! But it is not important that we understand it; what is important for us to know is that *God* understands it!

It may be that this section is reinforcing the idea that much of God's providence is *incomprehensible* to us.

To us not to God!

We are to live with mystery every day of our lives, just as we will in heaven. Even there, there will be things that will baffle us, confound us, knock us off our feet. With angels, we will be in awe of the complexity of what God does.

But there will never be a moment when we shall conclude: *this isn't fair*. Never!

The truth encapsulated in Romans 8:28, that everything works out in fulfillment of a divine and all-wise plan does not imply that we can fathom its intricate blue-prints. Sometimes all we can do is gasp at its audacity and sublimity. God's providence takes out breath away.

But perhaps there is more here than that. That, after all, had been the message of chapters 38 and 39 as God had asked Job to survey the universe and ponder its complexity and intricacy. Here, in chapters 40 and 41, God is saying something more than that. Leviathan and Behemoth are representatives of evil, *of Satan!* Job, remember, knew virtually nothing about Satan. He was certainly entirely ignorant of the first two chapters where we are told of Satan's wager: "allow me to take away from Job all that he has and you will see him in full scale denial." That, mercifully, had proved to be false. But Job had very close to it, blaming God for what in fact had been Satan's doing. Now he is being told in the language of pictures that another *being* as at work in the universe. This creature is powerful and threatening.

And fearsome! "...he is king over all that are proud" (Job 41:34).

Is this what Job confesses following the depictions of these two beasts, whenever he says, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5)? Has Job come to realize that God is so powerful that not even the threats of Satan himself can undo his purpose towards his own? Satan may well be uncontrollable as far as we are concerned:

"Can you make a pet of him like a bird
or put him on a leash for your girls?" (Job 41:5)

But he is not uncontrollable as far as God is concerned. Job may not be able to overcome Leviathan's power. He may not be able to "pull in leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope...[or] put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a kook" (Job 41:1-2). But God can! That is what Job has come to see. No matter how evil things may appear, or how afraid he may be, God is in control of everything and nothing is a threat to Him. To put it in a form in which the New Testament might say it: "...neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:37-39). He who is able to "seize the dragon" (Rev 20:2), the "great dragon...who leads the whole world astray" (Rev 12:9), will be victorious. How come? "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8).

There is no power that can undo the purposes of Almighty God. Job finds himself reduced to confessing his ignorance *and* his sinfulness:

I know that You can do all things;
no plan of Yours can be thwarted...
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me to know...
My ears had heard of You
But now my eyes have seen You.
Therefore I despise myself
And repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:2,3,5)

Job had failed to consider the complexity of God's ways. He had also failed to consider the malevolence of Satan. Who can fathom how God "allows sin and evil" but yet, is not the author of it? Who of us can understand how God can bring Satan into the picture as He does in the opening chapters, saying to him, "Have you considered My servant Job?" while at the same time maintaining His moral goodness and perfection.

The Devil wants us to think about him as little as possible. He is never happier than when he is ignored. As Lewis so cleverly put it:

"...the more a man was in the Devil's power, the less he would be aware of it, on the principle that a man is still fairly sober as long as he knows he's drunk. It is the people who are fully awake and trying hard to be good who would be most aware of the Devil. It is when you start arming against Hitler that you first realize your country is full of Nazi agents. Of course, they don't want you to believe in the Devil. If devils exist, their first aim is to give you an anaesthetics to put you off your guard. Only if that fails, do you become aware of them." (4)

For a while, a good while, the Devil had gained such a victory over Job. But now the anaesthetic has worn off. His mask has fallen. Job has come to see that the universe is much more complicated than he first assumed.

But God is still in control. And that is the best instruction he can receive. The shadow of the cross falls over every Christian's pain and says: that pain is mine; it fills up "what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24). And what is more wondrous still, God has sent His Son into the world so that in His life and death, He has "disarmed the powers and authorities, [making] a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15).

Job has only glimpsed it, of course. Like a man who desires to see over a wall, jumps into the air to catch a fleeting glimpse of what lies the other side, so Job has caught a moments glance at what lies "the other side" of the cross. He has caught sight of the victory a victory which he cannot fully explain, but which he knows to be a certainty.

It is something that holds true for every believer. For you and for me.

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