

Yahweh's Conflict with the Leviathan and Sea

Throughout the history of the ancient Near East, the imagery of the leviathan (sea serpent/dragon) and raging sea have been symbols or metaphors for the concepts of evil and chaos. Though it is very clear that leviathans really did exist in the same way that the sea really does exist, they often became a metaphor in the writings of the ancients for all that is evil in the world. Though this paper will not be an exhaustive discussion on the topic, it will briefly discuss the use of this imagery in the pagan mythologies followed by how Yahweh used it in the Bible to communicate His message to the Jews of the ancient Near East.

Chaos, Then Creation

Before we look at the way that the image of the leviathan is used in Scriptures, we must first look at the way it was understood in the cultures the Jews came out of and were surrounded by throughout history. The most prominent place that the images of the leviathan and the sea are found is in the creation accounts of the pagan mythologies. In these accounts the leviathan and sea are personified as gods and are the embodiment of evil in creation. The god who desires to rule creation must first overcome the leviathan and sea.

First, we will look at how the Babylonian and Canaanite cultures understood the sea, since these are the cultures from which the Hebrews were created and by which they were influenced, and then we will look at how Scripture uses this image.

The Sea in Babylonian Mythology

The Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, tells of the demise of the primordial gods Apsu and Tiamat at the hands of Marduk who creates the world. In the beginning all that existed were the divine parents Apsu and Tiamat and their son Mummu. Apsu was the primeval sweet-water ocean, his wife Tiamat was the salt-water ocean, and their son was the mist. These waters were mingled in one immense and undefined mass that contained all the elements from which Marduk later created the world. There was neither heaven nor earth at this time.

Apsu and Tiamat began to give birth to a whole host of gods, and after many years they gave birth to Anu, the sky god, who then gave birth to Ea, the god of wisdom. Ea was so superior to all the other gods that he became ruler over them all, even over his parents.

One day Apsu decided to kill all the other gods (with the exception of Tiamat and Mummu) because they made so much noise he could not sleep. When Ea found out about this, he magically put Apsu to sleep, stole his might and splendor, and then slew him. Ea established himself as supreme ruler over the other gods.

Tiamat, enraged, swore vengeance on all the other gods and began to amass her army. She gave birth to eleven kinds of monster serpents and fierce dragons, and she made Kingu her new spouse and general over her forces. Thus, there was the emergence of a formidable demonic host.

When Ea and the other gods heard of this, they were crippled with fear. The gods tried to attack Tiamat but discovered that they could not conquer her through magic; their attack had to be through physical force, which only added to their fear. From out of the hopelessness, Marduk, Ea's son, rose up to conquer Tiamat. However, he demanded that after his victory, he be made supreme and undisputed ruler over all gods. They agreed unanimously.

Marduk was given wisdom by Ea and as the storm god, he filled his body with a blazing flame, caused lightning to come out from his body, and with seven winds and a rain-flood that he created, he mounted his storm chariot, drawn by four frightful mythological creatures, and set out to face Tiamat.

Marduk's coming in might and splendor threw Kingu and his helpers into confusion, leaving only the frenzied Tiamat. When Tiamat opened her mouth to devour Marduk, he sent a wind into it to prevent it from shutting, then shot an arrow into her mouth, which pierced her heart and killed her. Marduk then chased down the sea monsters and dragons and imprisoned them in the deep.

Marduk then cut the body of Tiamat in half, and with one half of her watery body he formed the sky, and with the other half he formed the earth. He then established the years, months, and days. He built gates in the east and west for the sun to enter and depart and established the sun and the moon to govern the day and night. (*Here the text breaks off.*)

The imprisoned gods then complained that their tasks were too menial, so Marduk slew Kingu, and out of his blood he created mankind to serve and feed the Babylonian gods.

Marduk assigned each of the gods to govern the various parts of creation and took his place as supreme and undisputed ruler. The *Enuma Elish* closes with the gods' recitation of the glorious fifty names of Marduk and the exhortation for people to memorize them and recite them.

The primary purpose of the *Enuma Elish* is to offer cosmological reasons for Marduk's rise to supreme and undisputed ruler and thus his right to be creator. The recitation of the *Enuma Elish* during the Babylonian New Year's Festival suggests that Marduk's celebrated mastery was not a given, but that through the community's recitation, Marduk's sovereignty over the world was renewed.¹

The Sea in Canaanite Mythology

The Ugaritic Ba'al myth tells of how Ba'al (god of the sun, rain, thunder, fertility, and agriculture, and the lord of Heaven) conquers Yamm (god of the sea and rivers) and then Mot (god of death, underworld, and sterility).

Though the text is badly damaged, the story opens in the middle of a conflict between Ba'al and Yamm. Yamm is seeking the aid of El, his heavily drinking father and the creator of the Canaanite gods, goddesses, and mankind, who is also known as the Bull. He grants his aid to his son Yamm and encourages him to drive Ba'al from the throne of his kingdom, from the seat of his dominion. "If you do not drive him from his throne, he will beat you."

After a break in the text, the story continues with the gods feasting at a banquet held in El's palace, when Yamm's messengers show up. Upon seeing the messengers of Yamm, all the gods drop their heads to their knees, and Ba'al rebukes them for their cowardice. The messengers of Yamm demands that Ba'al be delivered up to Yamm-Nahar [River], and El promises that Ba'al will be handed over. Ba'al tells the messengers that he will not bow to Yamm and that Yamm must beware of him.

¹ See Jon D. Levenson. *Creation and Chaos and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 7.

After a break in the tablets, Ba`al and Yamm taunt each other. Then Kothar-and-Khasis (meaning "Skillful-and-Wise," he is a smith, craftsman, engineer, inventor, and magician) tells Ba`al it is time to strike. Kothar arms Ba`al with two magic weapons, Yagarish (Chaser) and Ayamari (Driver). Ba`al attacks Yamm-Nahar with Yagarish, striking him between the shoulders, but he is not subdued. Then Ba`al strikes Yamm between the eyes with Ayamari, and Yamm sinks to the earth. Ba`al would have given the final blow, but he is restrained by `Athtartu who reminds him that Yamm is now their captive and Ba`al will surely reign. Ba`al is ashamed and spares his vanquished enemy, while Yamm keeps repeating: "I am as good as dead! Surely Ba`al is king! Indeed, Ba`al rules!" Yamm is then confined to the sea and Ba`al serves a huge feast in celebration of his triumph on his sacred Mount Zaphon, the Heights of the North.

Anat (Ba`al's sister, the violent war-goddess and goddess of love and desire) proceeds to slay the enemies of Ba`al. Their heads roll beneath her, and their hands fly above her like locusts. She hangs heads on her back, binds hands to her belt, and wades up to her knees in blood. Later Anat will declare, "Did I not snare the Dragon, vanquish/envelop him? I did demolish the Wriggling/Twisting/Tortuous Serpent, the Tyrant with Seven Heads. I did demolish the Darling of the gods, Arsh, Desire, I did silence/annihilate the Calf divine/of El, Atik, the Quarrelsome, the Rebellious One" (KTU 1.3.III.38-40). However, later Ba`al is also given credit for this as well; "...for all that/When/If now thou smotest/killed/goest fighting Lotan (=Leviathan), the Slippery/Evasive/Fleeing Serpent, made an end of/finished off/to destroy the Wriggling/Twisting/Tortuous/Slant Serpent, Shalyat the Tyrant of seven heads/ The seven-headed monster (of might)" (KTU 1.5.I.28).

Ba`al sends a message to Anat, asking her to be at peace now and to fill the land with love. Anat answers that she will do these things when Ba`al sets in the heavens his thunder-bolt, and causes his lightning-flash! Upon her arrival at Zaphon, Ba`al complains that he has no house like the other gods. Anat says that El will attend to her, or she will drag him to the ground like a lamb and make his grey hairs run with blood, if he doesn't give Ba`al a court.

Anat and Athirat (consort of El) obtain El's permission for Ba`al to have a house of gold and silver built. Athirat adds that now at last Ba`al will observe the season for his rain. Ba`al tells Kothar that he should furnish the house with a window through which Ba`al can send his lightning, thunder, and rain. All Ba`al's foes tremble at the sound. Then Ba`al withdraws within his house and declares his supremacy, announcing that he will not send tribute to El's new favorite, Mot (god of death and the underworld). Ba`al sends his messengers to Mot in the pit under the earth, refusing to give him tribute.

Mot declares that his enormous appetite is insatiable and threatens to devour Ba`al. Ba`al is filled with dread and sends back a humble reply, "Be gracious, O divine Mot; I am thy slave, thy bondman for ever." Mot rejoices and commands Ba`al to bring his clouds, winds, thunder, and rains and descend into the depths of the netherworld where he will kill him Ba`al. Ba`al obeys.

Anat then goes in search of Ba'al, finding his body on the shores of the lake of Death and mourns, cutting her flesh and weeping. The soil and the fields are parched because of Ba`al's absence. After the passage of an unspecified amount of time, Anat seizes Mot, splits him with her sword, winnows him with her fan, burns him with fire, grinds him in her hand-mill and sows him in the ground where his body is devoured by birds.

After a break in the text, Ba`al returns and reassumes his throne on Mount Zaphon. After seven years Mot appears again, demanding that Ba`al give him one of his brothers to eat; if he does not,

then Mot shall consume all humankind. Then the two gods butt each other like antelopes, fighting for a long time, and then both fall to the ground. Mot concedes to Ba'al, Ba'al resumes his throne, and there is a great feast.

The Ba'al epic portrays Ba'al as having to defeat Yamm in order to earn his right to rule over creation. The Ba'al epic also explains the cycle of winter, summer, famine, and good times through the yearly battle between Ba'al and Mot. Ba'al's victory is an act of salvation, which enables the created order to endure. Thus, Ba'al is not seen as the supreme and undisputed ruler as was with Marduk.

Common Themes Among the Myths

Though at first glance Marduk and Ba'al may seem to be great and powerful gods who conquer a formidable enemy, we can see that this is not true as we look closer at the details. The first question is what is the origin and nature of the gods? In these myths we see that the first gods Apsu and Tiamat (Babylonian) and El (Canaanite) are not eternal and they are impersonal gods that not only are disconnected from creation but sometimes the other gods as well. Likewise the later gods Marduk (Babylonian) and Ba'al (Canaanite) that become the high gods are not eternal in their origin rather they were created by the other gods. It is also important to notice that these gods are flawed and are seen as just an immoral at times as the humans that they rule over.

The next question is how did the high gods (Marduk and Ba'al) conquer the sea? In both accounts the high god needed the help of another god in some way or form. With Marduk he needed wisdom from Ea in order to defeat Tiamat (the sea). Ba'al likewise not only obtained weapons from Kothar that become crucial in the defeat of Yamm (the sea) but he also needed the help of his sister Anat who defeated the last of his enemies. He also needed her help to free him from Mot in his second epic battle.

Another important factor is that neither Marduk nor Ba'al are able to totally eliminate or gain mastery over the sea. It is still present throughout time and is a constant threat to their sovereignty. Once again with Ba'al this is seen clearly with his annual conflict with Mot.

A final question is how are the high gods kingship established and how secure are they? With both Marduk and Ba'al their rule is granted only through the agreed consent of the other gods. The implication of Marduk making a deal with Ea and Ba'al requesting a house from El is that if they were rejected they would not be able to be the high god. With Marduk, he not only needs permission from the other gods but his reign is also dependent upon the annual New Year recitation of the *Enuma Elish*. With Ba'al he is constantly threatened by Mot who not only challenges his rule but also continually defeats him.

Though there is a high god that rules over the other gods and creation it is important to know that their sovereignty is still limited. All the gods are seen as a god of a particular element or territory, thus their power is limited to that element or territory. This is why Marduk and Ba'al needed the help of others because even though they are the only ones who were able to defeat the sea they are also limited to their specific elements (thunder and rain).

Why Does the Sea Represent Evil and Chaos?

It is clear from the accounts above that in the ancient Near East the sea was seen as an evil god who brought chaos and sought the destruction of or dominance over others. Along with this god come a host of followers portrayed as sea serpents, dragons, and the leviathan. It is this Sea and its minions that the hero-god must conquer before he can establish his rule or create the world as we now know it.

Why did the ancient Near East and the rest of the world see the sea as a symbol of evil and chaos in creation? As we look at the many creation accounts it is clear that earth, sky, and sea are not only the first three elements in creation but also the three biggest. The sky is not seen as threatening because it is merely a large canopy of mist that hovers over the earth and it contains the planets and the stars. The earth is also not threatening because it is solid and stable. In fact it is from the earth that mankind builds their homes and in it plants their gardens and finds shelter. Yes there may be earthquakes but these are few and without large structures like we have today earthquakes are not really that threatening.

It is the sea that is mysterious, unstable, and a constantly changing force in the world. The sea has no end to its depth and disappears into a watery abyss. The sea can produce waves that swallow and destroy boats within seconds and it sends hurricanes, typhoons, and floods onto the land in order to destroy villages. It also contains large, mysterious, and dangerous animals that threaten to destroy mankind. The sea was also an everyday part of the people of the ancient Near East lives since they would have built their homes close to the coast in order to be close to water. Even today the sea is a massive element that contains many mysteries and is still a force that can destroy in minutes the greatest ships and cities that mankind can build.

It is important to understand that the people of the ancient Near East do not always literally see the sea as evil but that it serves as a symbol for evil and chaos. This is similar to the fact that we see the number thirteen as symbol of bad luck and evil and the middle finger directed towards someone as offensive but we would not say that the number thirteen and the middle finger in themselves are literally evil or offensive. As we go through the Scriptural accounts of Yahweh's conflict with the sea and the leviathan we must see this imagery not as a mythological battle but for what it is truly communicating. The point of these passages is to demonstrate Yahweh's defeat of Satan and evil before creation and His mastery over them throughout the history.

Yahweh's Subduing of the Sea and Leviathan in Genesis One

In Gen. 1:2a the world before creation is described as being formless, empty, dark, and a watery mass. The words "formless and empty" (tohuwabohu) are used in one other place in Scripture, Jer. 4:23 (Isa. 34:11 in parallelism). This combination is used to refer to a barren wasteland and of judgment. "Darkness" is used to symbolize all that is evil and opposes God (Ex. 10:21; 1 Sam 2:9; Ps. 88:13; Isa. 9:1; 45:7; 1 Jn. 1:5). In verse 1:4 that it is only the light that is called good. The "watery deep" (tehom) refers to the chaotic waters of the sea, which is used to communicate the idea of evil and chaos.

In Gen. 1:2b we see the spirit of God hovering over the waters of the earth. The Hebrew word used for "water" (mayim) here refers to the life-giving waters for creation. The contrast is between the negative connotation of the watery abyss and the life-giving waters that result from the Spirit of God transforming them. This is Yahweh's first redemptive act of undoing the

negative nature of the earth in verse 2a. Yahweh continues on by undoing the darkness with light (Gen. 1:3) and then forming and filling the creation in Gen. 1:3-31.

Whereas the creation accounts portray the sea as some great and terrible monster god that has to be destroyed, Genesis portrays it as merely an element of creation that needs to be changed into something positive. Here Yahweh demonstrates His supremacy over the other gods by reducing the subduing of chaos to one simple sentence in His creation account. This is further demonstrated in Gen. 1:21, where God is seen creating the sea creatures or leviathans. For Yahweh the leviathan is merely a creature that He has created, not a monster that has the potential to overcome Him.

Yahweh's Subduing of the Sea and Leviathan in Poetry

Though the *Enuma Elish* bears similarities to the Biblical creation account, it is the Ugaritic Ba'al myth that most closely parallels the Psalmic and prophetic passages concerning the sea. Just like the mythological accounts, the Bible portrays the sea (*yam*) as a force of chaos and evil that Yahweh must overcome to declare His sovereignty and right to create the world.

In the Ugaritic Ba'al myth, the "dragon" and the "twisting serpent, the tyrant with seven heads" is seen as synonymous with "Lotan" or the seven-headed "Leviathan" (KTU 1.5.I.28). Likewise, in scripture the seven-headed leviathan (*liwyatan*) is also called the "twisting or fleeing serpent" (Job 26:13; Isa. 27:1) or the dragon (*tannin*, Isa. 27:1; 51:9; Job 7:12; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2; Jer. 51:34) and is synonymous with the sea (*yam*), which are all portrayed as chaos and evil before creation. As in the mythological accounts, these two images (leviathan and sea) always appear representing forces that man cannot withstand and only the gods can contend with.

Though the Bible may share similarities with the pagan myths in the symbols and language that it uses it is important to understand that Yahweh uses this common symbol and language in order to communicate to the people of these cultures the differences between Him and the other gods. The differences are the character and the actions of Yahweh, which show Him to be a far superior God to any other that exists.

What is unique about the Scripture's use of these images is Yahweh's total dominance over the leviathan and the sea. Where the other gods had difficulty battling the sea (and when they were able to conquer it, the sea would rise up again and again to threaten their sovereignty), Scripture, in contrast, tells of Yahweh's total dominance over the leviathan and the sea; their survival is only because He has allowed it for His own purposes. Likewise, we see a God who did not need the help of any other being, as Marduk did of Ea and Ba'al did of Anat. Yahweh is also primordial in existence and transcendent to His creation, unlike Ba'al and Marduk and the many other gods. Nor does Yahweh need the permission of any other to rule and His rule is not limited to any element or territory.

This conflict between Yahweh and the sea is portrayed in Scriptures as being fought and concluded, with Yahweh's victory, before His creation of the heavens and the earth. Though we are not told how the conflict came about and the exact details of it, Yahweh's mastery over the leviathan and the sea is clearly seen. Psalm 74:12-17 tells of Yahweh's conquering the sea and the leviathan closely parallels the *Enuma Elish* and its counterparts.

Psalm 74:12-17

12 But God has been my king from ancient times,
performing acts of deliverance on the earth.

- 13 You destroyed the sea by your strength;
you shattered the heads of the sea monster [tannin] in the water.
- 14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you fed him to the people who live along the coast.
- 15 You broke open the spring and the stream;
you dried up perpetually flowing rivers.
- 16 You established the cycle of day and night;
you put the moon and sun in place.
- 17 You set up all the boundaries of the earth;
you created the cycle of summer and winter.

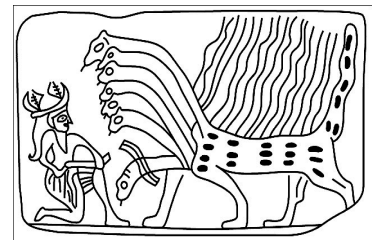
In verse 12 “my king from ancient times” implies primordial times when Yahweh attained His kingship, which gives us the historical context of the passage as pre-creation.

In the Ugaritic account the god Ba`al defeated the sea, known as Prince Yamm (“sea”), Judge River, Lotan (or the twisting seven-headed dragon—the Biblical “Leviathan”), and “Tannin” (the Biblical “dragon”). Each of these words occurs in some form in Psalm 74:12-17, but it is the Ugaritic literature that gives these words meaning to the modern reader that would otherwise be a mystery. However, in Scripture these beings have been demythologized (stripped of divinity and seen as mere elements).

In Psalm 74:12-17, the mention of Yahweh’s victory over the sea and the leviathan (vv. 12-15) before His act of creation (vv. 16-17) makes it clear that this conflict was fought and won by Yahweh before He created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1-2).

In verse 13 “destroyed the sea” (NET) or “split *or* divided the sea” (NIV, NASB) comes from the Hebrew word *porarta*, and its derivation and meaning are uncertain. This verb always appears with the Hiphil or Hophal stem, which would mean “to split” or “to divide,” referring to the separation of the waters after Yahweh’s victory over the sea. A Hitpolel form of a root (*parar*) appears in Isa. 24:19 with the meaning “to shake violently,” which would refer to His actual conquering of the sea. With either understanding it is still clear that creation is in view here.

Verse 14 refers to the “heads” of a sea monster, connecting it to the same figure that is seen in so many mythological accounts of the leviathan and sea—as a seven-headed sea serpent. The image of the number “seven” in the ancient near east represented perfection, completion, and fullness. It is used of the leviathan to portray its fullness of evil and its all-consuming nature.



It is clear that Psalmist has a battle in mind because everything written in connection with the sea or leviathan is of Yahweh conquering what already exists (not creating them). If the literal sea is in mind here along with the rest of creation than why does the psalmist use words like “destroyed,” “shattered,” “crushed,” and “broke”? These are not the words of creating like those used in verses 16-17, “established,” “put,” “set,” and “created.” In verses 12-15 the sea already exist and is a threat that Yahweh has to deal with before He can begin to create in verses 16-17. This passage speaks of Yahweh’s total mastery being something *not* self-evident, unthreatened, and already in existence from all eternity, but as something dramatic and won.

Psalm 65:6-7 tells of Yahweh's subduing the sea in connection to creation. It specifically mentions that He created the mountains, but He subdued the sea; with no mention to its creation.

- 6 You created the mountains by your power,
and demonstrated your strength.
- 7 You calm the raging seas
and their roaring waves,
as well as the commotion made by the nations.

The name *Rahab* is another name that appears in association with the leviathan in Scriptures. The name *Rahab* means "proud one" (Ps. 87:4; 89:10; Job 9:13; 26:12; Isa. 30:7; 51:9) and is exclusive to Hebrew literature since it has not yet been found in other literature. However, it is clear that it is connected to the sea as *chaos* and *evil*.

Psalm 89:8-14

- 8 O Lord, sovereign God!
Who is strong like you, O Lord?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.
- 9 You rule over the proud sea.
When its waves surge, you calm them.
- 10 You crushed Rahab and killed it;
with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.
- 11 The heavens belong to you, as does the earth.
You made the world and all it contains.
- 12 You created the north and the south.
Tabor and Hermon rejoice in your name.
- 13 Your arm is powerful,
your hand strong,
your right hand victorious.
- 14 Equity and justice are the foundation of your throne.
Loyal love and faithfulness characterize your rule.

The fact that *Rahab* and the "fleeing serpent" (*nachash bariach*) are mentioned in parallel in Job 26:12-13 and that *Rahab* is mentioned in parallel to "the dragon" (*tannin*) in Isaiah 51:9 shows that it is an alternative name for the leviathan.

Job 26:5-14

- 5 The dead tremble –
those beneath the waters
and all that live in them.
- 6 The underworld is naked before God;
the place of destruction lies uncovered.
- 7 He spreads out the northern skies over empty space;
he suspends the earth on nothing.
- 8 He locks the waters in his clouds,
and the clouds do not burst with the weight of them.
- 9 He conceals the face of the full moon,
shrouding it with his clouds.
- 10 He marks out the horizon on the surface of the waters

- as a boundary between light and darkness.
- 11 The pillars of the heavens tremble
and are amazed at his rebuke.
 - 12 By his power he stills the sea;
by his wisdom he cut Rahab the great sea monster to pieces.
 - 13 By his breath the skies became fair;
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent [nachash].
 - 14 Indeed, these are but the outer fringes of his ways!
How faint is the whisper we hear of him!
But who can understand the thunder of his power?

It is clear from these passages that the sea represented chaos and evil that existed before creation. The language of the passages also makes clear that Yahweh went to war against it and defeated it. It is Yahweh's victory over this sea that enables Him to create the world, which is seen as an act of redemption. This fits with our understanding of an angelic rebellion led by Satan, whereby Yahweh defeated them before He created the earth and humanity.

Yahweh's Sovereignty over the Sea

Even beyond the creation account, the imagery of Yahweh defeating the sea and the leviathan continues on throughout history. Yahweh uses this imagery to establish His right to rule and His ability to maintain order in creation.

Yahweh on His Throne

Kingship over the world plays a significant role both in the pagan cultures and in the Scriptures. The gods are seen as having the right to rule because they have subdued chaos; however, they have to continually battle chaos in order to *maintain* their kingship. With Yahweh, in contrast, He is king over the world because He has conquered chaos, and there is no continued contest.

Archeologists have found images of Marduk and other gods depicted as seated on a throne that is above the heavenly sea, and below the waters are the sun, moon, and stars. The text that describes the images states that the god is seated on the celestial waters, and you can see the sun, moon, and stars below the waters.

Isaiah 40:22 depicts Yahweh enthroned above the earth, which falls in the middle of a description of Yahweh's glory and sovereignty (Isa. 40) and ends with His challenge to the nations (Isa. 41:1-8). "He is the one who sits on the earth's horizon; its inhabitants are like grasshoppers before him."

In Psalm 29:3,10 we also see that Yahweh's throne is established over the sea and that it is His might and sovereignty that keeps the chaos subdued and evil in check.

Psalm 29:3,10

- 3 The Lord's shout is heard over the water;
the majestic God thunders,
the Lord appears over the surging water.
- 10 The Lord sits enthroned over the engulfing waters,



the Lord sits enthroned as the eternal king.

Yahweh is depicted in Scriptures as seated on His throne over the earth (2 Chr. 18:18; Ps. 9:4, 7:11:4; 47:8; 89:14; 97:2; 103:19; Isa. 6:1; 66:1) and battling against the gods and nations from Mt. Zion's (Isa. 66:18-21; Ezk. 38-39; Joel 3:9-21; Zech. 14:2-4; 2 Esdras 13:55). Yahweh roars above the earth (Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2) and gives the rains unlike the other gods (Isa. 30:19; Jer. 3:3; 5:24; 10:13; 14:4; 51:16; Amos 4:7).

Not only is there a connection between Yahweh's victory over the sea and creation, but the theme of His kingship is also closely associated with this victory. Psalm 74:12-17 and 89:8-14 show that because Yahweh is the only one who has conquered the leviathan and the sea, He is the sovereign king and no one can threaten His rule; there is no one greater than He.

In Psalm 24 Yahweh is described as a mighty warrior who fought with the sea and has dominion over the earth as the unique and all-powerful Yahweh, which no one and nothing can touch or threaten.

Psalm 24

- 1 The Lord owns the earth and all it contains,
the world and all who live in it.
- 2 For he set its foundation upon the seas,
and established it upon the ocean currents.
- 3 Who is allowed to ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may go up to his holy dwelling place?
- 4 The one whose deeds are blameless
and whose motives are pure,
who does not lie,
or make promises with no intention of keeping them.
- 5 Such godly people are rewarded by the Lord,
and vindicated by the God who delivers them.
- 6 Such purity characterizes the people who seek his favor,
Jacob's descendants, who pray to him. (Selah)
- 7 Look up, you gates!
Rise up, you eternal doors!
Then the majestic king will enter!
- 8 Who is this majestic king?
The Lord who is strong and mighty!
The Lord who is mighty in battle!
- 9 Look up, you gates!
Rise up, you eternal doors!
Then the majestic king will enter!
- 10 Who is this majestic king?
The Lord who commands armies!
He is the majestic king! (Selah)

Psalm 93 also shows Yahweh's reign over the world and His mastery over the sea, but also it shows that there is still a conflict between Yahweh and the sea in His creation.

- 1 The Lord reigns!
He is robed in majesty,

- the Lord is robed,
He wears strength around his waist
Indeed, the world is established, it cannot be moved.
- 2 Your throne has been secure from ancient times;
you have always been king.
- 3 The waves roar, O Lord,
the waves roar,
the waves roar and crash.
- 4 Above the sound of the surging water,
and the mighty waves of the sea,
the Lord sits enthroned in majesty.
- 5 The rules you set down are completely reliable.
Holiness aptly adorns your house, O Lord, forever.

In verse 3 the reader is told that the waters are still raging against Yahweh. Even though Yahweh has conquered the sea and subdued it, it still exists and is still causing problems. Here the Psalmist shows that evil still exists in the world and causes problems in Yahweh's kingdom. There are beings in the universe who do not want Yahweh to be king and so resist him.

However, this does not threaten Yahweh's kingship or sovereignty for verse 4 mentions that He is enthroned above the sound of the surging water. Likewise, there is only one verse given to the roar of the waters while the rest describe Yahweh's sovereignty, which is far greater than the sea.

Yahweh's Continued Conflict with the Sea

Scripture also shows that Yahweh did not totally annihilate the sea as chaos and evil and that its existence still presents a threat to creation. Though creation still awaits the total demise of the sea as chaos, it is clear that it only exists within the bounds that Yahweh established in creation.

Psalm 104:6-9

- 6 The watery deep covered it like a garment;
the waters reached above the mountains.
- 7 Your rebuke made the waters retreat;
at the sound of your thunderous voice they hurried off –
- 8 as the mountains rose up,
and the valleys went down –
to the place you appointed for them.
- 9 You set up a boundary for them that they could not cross,
so that they would not cover the earth again.

Here it can be seen that it is the divine power of Yahweh that keeps the sea at bay. It is the thunder of His rebuke that keeps these forces in check.

Job 38:8-11

- 8 Who shut up the sea with doors
when it burst forth, coming out of the womb,
- 9 when I made the storm clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
- 10 when I prescribed its limits,
and set in place its bolts and doors,

- 11 when I said, 'To here you may come
and no farther,
here your proud waves will be confined'?

In these passages the sea is not seen as a many-headed sea monster that needs to be vanquished, nor is it seen as annihilated and no more. Rather, the sea is seen as a threatening force that left unchecked would submerge creation under its chaos and destruction. The only thing that prevents this is Yahweh's mastery over the sea and keeping it in its proper place without any struggle.

Not only does Yahweh keep the sea in its proper place, but He also steps into history to deliver His people from the sea when it threatens to destroy them. This can be seen in Psalm 77:13-20 where the Psalmist praises Yahweh for His deliverance from the sea during the exodus from Egypt.

Psalm 77:13-20

- 13 O God, your deeds are extraordinary!
What god can compare to our great God?
14 You are the God who does amazing things;
you have revealed your strength among the nations.
15 You delivered your people by your strength –
the children of Jacob and Joseph. (Selah)
16 The waters saw you, O God,
the waters saw you and trembled.
Yes, the depths of the sea shook with fear.
17 The clouds poured down rain;
the skies thundered.
Yes, your arrows flashed about.
18 Your thunderous voice was heard in the wind;
the lightning bolts lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
19 You walked through the sea;
you passed through the surging waters,
but left no footprints.
20 You led your people like a flock of sheep,
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Israel's desire for God to subdue the sea that was present in their current time can be seen through the prophet Isaiah's words. Yahweh had delivered Israel from the sea of chaos at the parting of the Red Sea, and so they cry out for Him to subdue that sea once again and deliver them from their enemies in a second exodus out of exile.

Isaiah 51:9-10

- 9 Wake up! Wake up!
Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord!
Wake up as in former times, as in antiquity!
Did you not smash Rahab?
Did you not wound the sea monster [*tannin*]?
10 Did you not dry up the sea,

the waters of the great deep?
Did you not make a path through the depths of the sea,
so those delivered from bondage could cross over?

“...throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing, but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order. The defeat by YHWH of the forces that have interrupted that order is intrinsically an act of creation. The fact that order is being restored rather than instituted was not a difference of great consequence in the ancient Hebrew culture. To call upon the arm of YHWH to awake as in “days of old” is to acknowledge that those adversarial forces were not annihilated in perpetuity in primordial time. Rising anew, they have escaped their appointed bounds and thus flung a challenge at their divine vanquisher.”²

Though the leviathan/dragon and sea have been conquered by Yahweh and are under his control, they still are portrayed as a great adversary of humanity in the Scriptures. The dragon boasts that it is he who created the streams (Ezk. 29: 3; 32:2), yet God proclaims that the dragon is a creation of His own making (Job 40:19). The Dragon is seen as arrogant (Job 41:25, 32, 34; Psalm 74:18, 23; 89:9-10; Ps. Sol. 2:29, 32-33; Ezk. 29:3), wreaking havoc (Job 41:31; Psalm 68:30; 74:3; 89:9; Ezk. 32:2, 32), and the evil one (Psalm 74:3, 4, 10, 18, 23; 89:10; Ps. Sol. 2:1, 35). The other gods attempted to battle with the dragon and struggle against it, but Yahweh is the only one who has truly conquered it and treats it as a slave or plaything. Yahweh is the Divine Warrior who conquers all that threatens His people because He reigns supreme over all others (Deut. 33:26-19; Judg. 5:2-5; Ps. 18).

The Leviathan and Behemoth in Job

In the Bible the true force behind the leviathan and the sea is Satan. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the book of Job, where Satan (as it reads in the Hebrew) goes before Yahweh and asks permission to attack Job to test his righteousness. Throughout the book Job uses imagery of the leviathan when dealing with the problem of evil in the world.

In Job 3:8 Job states that there are people trying to conjure up chaos to destroy things. “Let those who curse the day curse it – those who are prepared to rouse leviathan.” In Job 9:13 we see Yahweh angrily defeating the forces of chaos. “God does not restrain his anger; under him the helpers of *Rahab* lie crushed.” As already mentioned Job 26:12 shows that it is God who created and controls the sea. “By his power he stills the sea; by his wisdom he cut *Rahab* the great sea monster to pieces.”

This comes to a conclusion in Job 41, which is very poetic and hyperbolic. Job has already voiced his knowledge of evil forces in the world, but he has not connected the dots with how it is affecting him. In Job 41 the leviathan represents Satan and evil. Here Yahweh shows up and declares that the problem of evil is too big for Job to handle and that Yahweh is the only one who can contend with the leviathan.

There are some who say that the leviathan is simply a crocodile and that Yahweh is just declaring His might over an animal that would scare mere humans. However, this robs Yahweh's speech of its force and loses the point of Yahweh being an all-sovereign Yahweh. Likewise, the whole intention of the speech is that there is no one except Yahweh who can contend with the

² Jon D. Levenson. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 12.

leviathan. "Who is he, then, who can stand before it?" (41:10). The fact that there is no animal that man has not captured or conquered rules this out as literal animal. The book ending with Yahweh's sovereignty over the leviathan (the Satan) fits well with the mention of the Satan in the beginning the beginning of the book.

What is fierce and overwhelming to man is merely a plaything to Yahweh (41:3-5), unlike with Ba`al and Marduk. Yahweh sees the Satan as merely a toy in comparison to His power and sovereignty. Though Job and the rest of man may not understand the problem of evil, Yahweh states that He has it all under control and that there is nothing to fear.

Before this Yahweh gives a speech concerning the Behemoth and questioning if Job is able to contend with it. There are some who say that this is a hippopotamus or maybe even a dinosaur, but once again this does not fit, for the point is that only Yahweh can contend with it.

John Day suggests that the Behemoth, like the leviathan, is to be seen as a mythological beast in connection with chaos and evil (see John Day. *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, pp. 75-84). He argues that since the leviathan in Scripture was taken from Canaanite mythology that it would make sense for the Behemoth to be taken from Canaanite mythology as well. The creature Arsh or El's calf Atik was an ox-like beast (KTU 1.3.III.43-4) that dwelled in the sea (KTU 1.6.VI.51-3) just like the behemoth in Job (40:15, 23). It was a fierce, mythological creature that stood against Ba`al and who Anat claimed to have destroyed.

The fact that the description of this mythological beast closely matches the description of the Behemoth in Job and that both the Ugaritic Ba`al Myth and Job mention Arsh/Behemoth and Leviathan side by side makes it highly probable that the behemoth should be seen in the same context as the leviathan.

It is also interesting that in later Hebrew writings the defeat of the leviathan and behemoth became associated with the eschatological defeat of the dragon (1 Enoch 60:7-9; 2 Baruch 29:4; 2 Esdras 6:49-52). Hebrew writings see the leviathan as the female gender and ruler of the water and the behemoth as the male gender and the ruler of the land (Enoch 60:7-9; 2 Esdras 6:49-52).

Yahweh's Conflict with the Leviathan and Sea as the Nations

Another aspect of the leviathan and the sea is that, although Yahweh defeated them, they still manifested themselves in the present historical realm. There are numerous passages where Scripture identifies the surrounding nations as the sea or the leviathan. This is no surprise since scripture makes it clear that these nations were evil and opposed Yahweh and His redemptive plan in creation.

The most common references are in Egypt's connection to the dragon and *Rahab* (Psalm 77:17-12; 87:4; Isa. 30:7; 51:10; Ezk. 29:3-5; 32:2-8). Likewise, Yahweh's great victory over Egypt was the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea where He controlled the chaotic waters and used them against Egypt (Ex. 14-15).

Later the leviathan and the sea are associated with Assyria (Isa. 8:5-8; 17:12-14) and Babylon (Jer. 51:34; Hab. 3:8-10, 15). These passages often look back to the exodus and see Yahweh delivering His people out of exile as He did before with the exodus. There are also other unknown or general nations that are connected to the leviathan and the sea (Psalm 18:4-17; 46:3-4; 68:22; 144:5-7).

Yahweh's Future Conflict with the Leviathan and Sea

Scriptures bring the conflict with the leviathan to an end through His prophecies of the end times where He will ultimately defeat the leviathan and the sea. Unlike the pagan gods who are in constant conflict with leviathan and the sea, with Yahweh there will be an end to the conflict, where Yahweh is left as ultimate victor.

Divine Conflict with the Sea in Daniel

It is interesting in Daniel 7, when Daniel has a vision of the end times, the vision he is given is of four great and evil beasts coming up out of the raging sea. It is obvious from the context that the four beasts are ferocious creatures with the desire to destroy life; the fourth one is not even compared to any earthly creature. Though the four represent empires, the fourth also represents Antiochus IV and then the antichrist, who are both connected to the devil.

The origin of the beasts is the sea, which has already been clarified as symbolic of evil and chaos. This parallels Revelation 13:1, which also describes a beast coming out of the sea. In Revelation the beasts are seen in connection to the Satan and are parallel to the Daniel 7 passage. Jesus, in Luke 21:25, also refers to the raging of the sea in the end times.

It is clear that there is a sharp contrast and conflict between the beast and Yahweh, which shows that the beast is connected to the Satan. Its origins being the chaotic sea and the connection to the dragon in Rev. 12:9 and 13:11 make it clear that the fourth beast should be seen as some kind of leviathan or sea monster who is the Satan. In both Daniel 7 and Revelation 20, Yahweh and the Son of Man, who is Jesus Christ, gain the victory over the dragon, the beast, and the sea. Yet unlike in the prophets this victory is complete annihilation.

Yahweh's Final Victory over the Leviathan

Isaiah 24-27 speaks of Yahweh's ultimate victory and judgment in the eschaton. These chapters speak of Yahweh's triumph over His enemies, their judgment, and His reign on Mount Zion (24:21-23); of the great banquet and the celebration of the demise of death (25:6-8); of the resurrection of the dead (26:19); and the restoration of Yahweh's people (27:12-13). Isaiah 27:1 is the climax of this section with the ultimate annihilation of the leviathan.

Isaiah 27:1

At that time the Lord will punish
with His destructive, great, and powerful sword
Leviathan the fast-moving serpent [*nachash*],
Leviathan the squirming serpent [*nachash*];
He will kill the sea monster [*tannin*].



Between Daniel 7 and Isaiah 27:1 there is promise and a hope that evil will not always be present in the world and that one day Yahweh will remove all evil and chaos.

Revelation 19-22 parallels this passage by addressing the defeat and judgment of Yahweh's enemies (19:1-3; 19:11-20:15), the great banquet (19:6-9), the resurrection (20:4-6, 11-13), and the annihilation of death (20:14-15; 21:4), and the eternal reign in the new Zion.

It is also interesting that Revelation makes a point to mention that the Dragon who is the Serpent will be destroyed (Rev. 12:9; 20:10) and that there will be no more sea in the new sky and earth (Rev. 21:1).

Rabbinic Literature

Below are comments from Rabbinic literature throughout history showing that the Hebrews saw the sea as symbolic of chaos and evil.

“Resh Lakish said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the sea it continued to expand until the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked it and caused it to dry up.”³

“R. Judah said in the name of Rahab: When the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to create the world, He said to the lord of the sea: ‘open thy mouth and swallow up all the waters of the world.’ The latter answered ‘Sovereign of the universe, I have enough with my own!’ Thereupon God instantly trod him down and slew him, as it is said: *By this power He stamped down* [‘stilled’] *the sea; by His understanding He smote Rahab*. R. Isaac said: From this you may infer that the lord of the sea is called Rahab.”⁴

“Thereupon the waters immediately became turbulent and rose up to cover the earth as in the beginning until the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked them and subdued them, placing them under the soles of His feet; and He measured them with His palm so as not to augment or diminish them, and He made the sand the boundary of the sea, like a man who makes a fence for his vineyard; and when they [the waters] rise up and see the sand before them, they turn back, as it is said: *Do you not fear Me? Says the Lord; do you not tremble before Me? I placed the sand as the bound for the sea*, etc. (Jer. 5:22).”⁵

There are many more passages in the Midrash and Talmud making the same point. With the Scriptures, pagan mythology, the apocrypha, and rabbinic literature, it is clear that this was a common way of viewing the sea and leviathan in Scripture.

Why the Use of Such Imagery in the Bible?

It is clear from Scripture that Yahweh has used the ancient Near East metaphorical understanding of the leviathan and sea to communicate who He is and His supremacy over the forces of evil and chaos.

The use of the imagery of leviathan and sea is not surprising since the sea is already mentioned as existing and subdued in Genesis 1, implying that something has already happened. The initial battle is already over. Thus, these passages serve as background information for the presence of the sea in Genesis 1.

³ *B. Hagiga 12a.*

⁴ *B. Baba Bathra 74b.*

⁵ *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer, V.*

In a culture like this it is very important for Yahweh to present Himself in a way that the people would understand and that also shows Himself superior to the other gods. Because this is how the culture of the Israel would have seen the world, Yahweh reveals Himself to them through the language and imagery that they already understand.

The language is polemical, designed to affirm Yahweh as the one sovereign being over the world and the forces of chaos. This is how the other gods are presented, and Yahweh must present Himself as superior to the other gods; thus, He presents Himself with the same imagery—only as far superior in His sovereignty and actions.

“If the biblical stories are true, one would be surprised not to find some references to those truths in extra-biblical literature. And indeed in ancient Near Eastern myth we do see some kernels of historical truth. However, pagan authors vulgarized or bastardized those truths—they distorted fact, dressing it up with polytheism, magic, violence, and paganism. Fact became myth.”⁶

Yahweh is merely taking this myth that has distorted the truth of who He is and using the language imagery to demonstrate that He is the true power behind the stories. Through the cultures language He relates to them and through His sovereignty He is able to make it about Him once again.

The language is also more than imagery and polemic; there is also a reality behind it. Not that Yahweh literally fought the sea and a leviathan, but that this imagery has been contextualized to show the problem of evil. Evil was defeated in order for Yahweh to create, and chaos still rears its head. We are not told the origin of evil, but Yahweh assures His people that He did not create evil, but that it became evil on its own and that it is not eternal.

⁶ John D. Currid. *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, p. 32.

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