

Yahweh's Mastery Over Chaos

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 Hebrew people of the ancient Near East.

The Pagan Gods' Conflict with the Sea and Leviathan

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 out of which the Jews came and by which they were surrounded 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 out of which the Hebrews came and by which they were influenced, and then we will look at how Scripture uses this image.

The Babylonian Enuma Elish

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 gods 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. In the beginning was neither heaven nor earth, only the dark, chaotic primordial waters. Apsu and Tiamat began to give birth to a whole host of gods, one of which is 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.

Over time, the lesser gods (the children) began to war with each other to the point that it greatly distressed Apsu and Tiamat. One day, Apsu decided to kill all the lesser gods 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 killed him in his sleep. Ea established himself as supreme ruler over the other gods. Ea set up his palace over the abyss, which was the body of the dead Apsu. There in the abyss Ea and his wife Damkina gave birth to Marduk, an amazing god of beauty, majesty, and leadership.

Some of the lesser gods encouraged Tiamat to go to war with Anu and Ea for what they had done to Apsu. Tiamat gave birth to eleven kinds of monster serpents and fierce dragons, and she made Kingu her new spouse and general over her forces. 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. Marduk, Ea's son, rose up with great confidence to conquer Tiamat. However, he demanded first that he be made the supreme ruler over all gods. They agreed unanimously.

Marduk was given wisdom and matchless weapons by Ea. As the storm god, Marduk fashioned a bow of lightning and a net of seven whirlwinds. He mounted his storm chariot, drawn by four mythological creatures, and set out to face Tiamat.

Marduk's great whirlwind threw Kingu and his helpers into confusion, filling Tiamat with fear. 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 split 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.

The imprisoned gods then complained that their tasks were too menial, so Marduk slew Kingu, and out of his blood he created humanity 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 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 Ugaritic Ba'al Epic

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. El, an alcoholic, is the creator of the Canaanite gods and mankind, and is also known as the Bull. El wants to build a palace for his son Yamm and encourages him to drive Ba'al from the throne of his kingdom.

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, 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.

After a break in the tablets, Ba'al and Yamm taunt each other. Then Kothar-wa-Khasis (meaning "Skillful-and-Wise," he is a smith, craftsman, engineer, inventor, and magician) tells Ba'al it is time to strike and that he will win. Kothar arms Ba'al with two magic weapons, Yagarish (Chaser) and Ayamari (Driver). Ba'al attacks Yamm with Yagarish, striking him between the

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

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. Anat declares that she vanquished the seven-headed dragon/serpent/leviathan. However, later Ba'al is given credit for this as well.

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 thunderbolt 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.

Ba'al announces 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 offers to be his slave. 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 swallow 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 she mourns, cutting her flesh and weeping. The soil and the fields are barren 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 of humanity. Then the two gods ram 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 annual 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.

The Egyptian Creation Myth

Of three known Egyptian creation myths, the creation myth of the city of Heliopolis is the oldest. In the beginning, there was only the dark, empty, endless, chaotic waters—called Nun. Out of the chaotic Nun arose an island of land called a Ben-Ben, in the shape of a pyramid. At the same time, the sun god Atum (later associated with Re) willed himself into existence out of the Nun. Atum's name means both "Everything" and "Nothing." Atum was a hermaphrodite who contained all of masculinity and femininity within himself and stood as the sun at the top of the pyramid. Atum released the seed of life by having sex with himself, then spitting and sneezing Shu, the god of air, and the goddess Tefnut into existence. (Scholars debate the nature of Tefnut. Some say she is the goddess of moisture; others say heat.)

Leaving their father Atum on the Ben-Ben to meditate on the nature of eternity, Shu and Tefnut set out into the Nun to establish the world. After some time, Atum became concerned because his children had been gone for so long, so he removed his eye and sent it in search of them. While his eye was away, he created another eye to take its place. Shu and Tefnut later returned with the first eye of Atum. The returned eye, upon seeing the newly grown eye in Atum, became angry at its replacement. Atum then took the returned eye and placed it on his forehead, where it became the protective Udjat eye, the Eye of Ra, or the All-Seeing Eye displayed on the crowns of the pharaohs. Atum was so grateful for Shu and Tefnut's safe return that he shed tears of joy, which fell onto the fertile soil of the Ben-Ben and grew into men and women. (When ancient Egyptian creation accounts mentioned the creation of humankind at all, it was only in passing and more of an afterthought.)

Shu and Tefnut gave birth to Geb, the earth god, and Nut, the sky goddess. When they were birthed, they were entangled in a passionate love embrace. Shu, disapproving of this behavior, decided to separate them by raising Nut high up into the Nun, where she became the sky arched over the body of Geb, forever separated from each other. Shu became the air that held Nut up. Already pregnant, Nut gave birth to four children: Osiris, the ruler of the dead; Isis, the goddess of sovereignty; Seth, the usurper of the throne and later guardian of the sun god; and Nephthys, the consort of Seth and helper to Isis. The gods continued to procreate until everything in creation had come into being.

These nine gods are referred to as the Ennead ("group of nine"). The first five were the divine elements of the natural order, while the remaining four were the deities of the political order. For the ancient Egyptians, the natural and political orders were indistinguishable from each other.

The Egyptian creation myth of the city of Hermopolis added a group of eight primordial gods known as the Ogdoad ("group of eight"), which existed before the emergence of Atum. The Ogdoad consisted of Nun and Naunet, the primordial waters; Huh and Hauhet, the formlessness; Kuk and Kauket, the darkness; and Amun and Amaunet, the hiddenness. The males were depicted with the heads of frogs, and the females were depicted with the heads of snakes.

Also from the city of Heliopolis, the Egyptian Book of the Dead tells of Apophis who is seen as the great cosmic serpent and Lord of Chaos, the opponent of light and Ma'at (the concept of truth, balance, order, harmony, law, morality, and justice). He was associated with images of the serpent, evil lizard, and dragon. Each day, Re (Atum) the sun god sailed his ship across the arched body of Nut (the sky). At night, Apophis awaited Re to swallow him into the chaos and darkness. And each night, Re had to battle and defeat Apophis in order to rise in the morning. Thus, Re battled with chaos every night, never achieving ultimate and complete victory.

Common Themes Among the Myths

Though at first glance Mardu, Ba'al, and Atum 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), El (Canaanite), and Nun (Egyptian) are not eternal and are impersonal gods that not only are disconnected from creation but sometimes from the other gods as well. Likewise, the later gods, Marduk (Babylonian), Ba'al (Canaanite), and Atum (Egyptian) that become the high gods are not eternal in their origin rather were created by the other gods. It is also important to notice that these gods are flawed and are seen as just as immoral at times as the humans they rule over.

The next question is, "how did the high gods (Marduk and Ba'al) conquer the chaos (sea)?" In both accounts, the high god needed the help of another god in some way or form. Marduk needed wisdom from Ea in order to defeat Tiamat (the sea). Ba'al likewise not only obtained from Kothar weapons 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 Marduk, Ba'al and Re are not able to totally eliminate or gain mastery over the chaos. It is still present throughout time and is a constant threat to their sovereignty. This is seen clearly in Ba'al's 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. In the Egyptian mythology Atum becomes Re and Horus replaces Re.

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 Mardu, Ba'al, and Re 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.

Yahweh's Superiority to the Pagan Gods

As one comes to the Hebrew Bible, a completely different picture is given of Yahweh as the sovereign king and creator of the universe. Though the Bible will use some of the same imagery of the sea and the leviathan representing chaos, it strips them of their mythological nature and godlikeness and reduces them to mere elements of His creation. By doing this, Yahweh communicates to His people with the language of their culture but corrects their theology and presents a more accurate picture of the nature of chaos in relation to Himself as the sovereign king over creation.

Yahweh Subduing the Chaos in Genesis 1

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

However, unlike the pagan accounts, these things are not seen as monsters or beings that oppose Yahweh. In the beginning all there was was Yahweh (Gen. 1:1). Yahweh does not battle gods and monsters in order to assert His kingship or to create. He simply is and creates easily through His divine spoken word and will. First the chaotic waters are subdued through the wind/spirit (*ruach*) of God hovering over the waters of the earth (Gen. 2b). Then Yahweh speaks light into the darkness (Gen. 3). Then Yahweh forms and fills His creation (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. When the sea monster finally appears on Day 6 (Gen. 1:21), it is merely another one of Yahweh's created creatures, appearing almost as an afterthought.²

Yahweh in Contrast to the Pagan Gods

Though there are similarities with the creation account of the Bible and the pagan creation accounts, there are also major differences that make Yahweh unique from all the other gods.

First, in the pagan accounts of creation, the gods are not eternal but are born into existence. The pagan myths also tell of their demise and deaths through heavenly wars or humanity's forgetting them. They are also portrayed as being a part of creation and nature. Therefore, what happens to the one affects the other. However, Yahweh is portrayed as eternal, past and future, and His existence is not dependent upon the belief of humanity (Neh. 9:6; Job 41:11; Ps. 102:25; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 1:8). Yahweh is transcendent from His creation. What is done to the creation is not automatically what happens to Yahweh in His being. Though He is emotionally and relationally affected by creation, He is not ontologically affected in His essence.

Second, with the pagan gods there is a struggle against other gods and/or monsters in a cosmic battle in order to gain kingship, along with a struggle to subdue and separate the upper and lower waters. And in Egyptian creation accounts, the gods create through magical utterances. In contrast, Yahweh is the sovereign king over the universe, and there are no rivals. There is no battle in which Yahweh engages to gain or keep His kingship. He separates the waters and creates all things by simple, divine fiat and clear words. The things of creation are His handiwork, not His rivals (Ps. 19:1).

Third, the pagan gods are responsible for the creation of one or two elements but sometimes none at all. Thus, they are limited in power and control over one or two elements and are also portrayed as being limited in power over only certain regions/nations. In contrast, Yahweh is seen as creating all things in creation on every day of the creation week, making Him sovereign over all things in creation because He created all things.

² For a much more detail discussion of Genesis 1 see the *Genesis Notes* at www.knowingthebible.net.

Fourth, in the pagan accounts, either the gods are born out of chaos and contain chaos within themselves or the creation is seen as the result of some spiritual bloody and violent war. However, Yahweh created an orderly and good creation. Likewise, Yahweh is more than creator; He is the law-giver. He divides and separates the lights and waters, names them, and gives them functions to perform. He creates animals and humanity and commands them to be fruitful. He commands humanity to rule and subdue. He orders creation and sets up the boundaries for all things and expects all things to adhere to His directives.

Fifth, the pagan gods are portrayed as immoral, selfish beings who are just as sinful as humanity and so are not trusted nor respected by humanity, but rather are feared. In contrast, Yahweh is not only seen as a morally righteous being who is unlike any other in creation but also *is* the standard of all righteousness.

And finally, in the pagan accounts the creation of humanity is merely an afterthought, created to alleviate the work of the gods and to provide them with food. Humanity has no real purpose or value. In contrast, Yahweh created humans in His image to represent Him over creation. Humanity is the apex of creation, and everything in the creation week moves toward the creation of humanity. Everything was made for humanity: the land is to provide for them, plants are for their eating, and the animals belong to them. Humanity alone is made in the image of God. And Yahweh placed humanity in the garden, made for them, where He dwelt in order to have a loving relationship with Him.

For someone living in the ancient Near East, reading the Bible's creation account would have been revolutionary and refreshing. Consider the fact that Abraham was worshiping the gods of Babylon when Yahweh came and spoke to him, offering a mutual relationship. Yahweh's unique nature and character are why Abraham immediately abandoned his gods and followed Yahweh.

Yahweh's Mastery over the Sea and Leviathan

Genesis 1-2 makes it clear that there was no opposition to Yahweh or struggle with gods and chaos as He formed and filled creation. However, Genesis 3 tells how humanity's sin and rebellion against Yahweh brought chaos into Yahweh's creation. Thus, the poetic books tell of Yahweh's battle with chaos. But even though the poetic language portrays a battle with the metaphorical sea and leviathan (as a symbol of chaos), there is no real gridlock struggle described nor a hint of a doubt of Yahweh's sovereignty and dominance over the chaos. The chaos is there because of humanity's sin, not due to any weakness or failure on Yahweh's part. The sea and leviathan, as chaos, survive only because He has allowed it for His own purposes.

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 Himself 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.

Yahweh's Defeat 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.

Ps. 74:12-17 tells of Yahweh's conquering of the sea and the leviathan and closely parallels the *Enuma Elish* and its counterparts.

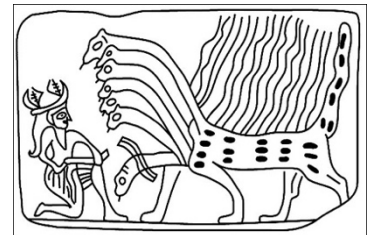
Psalm 74:12-17

- 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 Ps. 74:12 "my king from ancient times" implies primordial times and proclaims that Yahweh has always been king. Each of the words for *sea* and *leviathan* in the Ugaritic account occurs in some form in Ps. 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 rather than gods).

In Ps. 74:13 "destroyed the sea" (NET) or "split or divided the sea" (NIV, NASB) comes from the Hebrew word *porarta* and means "to split" or "to divide," referring to the separation of the waters after Yahweh's victory over the sea. A different form of the 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.

Ps. 74:14 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—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 the 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, then why does the psalmist use words like "destroyed," "shattered," "crushed," and "broke"? These are not the words of creating, like those used in Ps. 74:16-17—"established," "put," "set," and "created." Nor is this how a sane person would talk about the sea. Thus it is highly poetic and metaphorical language, painting a visual picture of Yahweh's

mastery over the chaos. The absolute certainty of Yahweh's victory in the past tense, declared in Ps. 74:12-17, shows that this defeat has already happened. Whether this was before, during, or after creation is not the point. The point is that Yahweh has total mastery over the chaos.

Ps. 65:6-7 tells of Yahweh's subduing the sea in connection to creation. It specifically mentions that He created the mountains but subdued the sea.

- 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 Yahweh, sovereign God!
Who is strong like you, O Yahweh?
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 Isa. 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?

Scripture embraces the tension between the reality that Yahweh is completely sovereign over creation and the chaos and the fact that chaos and suffering are so prevalent in the world. 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'?

Here the sea is seen as a threatening force that if 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 Ps. 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 Yahweh 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 Yahweh!
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.”³

Though the leviathan/dragon and sea have been conquered by Yahweh and are under his control, they still are portrayed in the Scriptures as a great adversary of humanity. 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; Ps. 74:18, 23; 89:9-10; Song 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 (Ps. 74:3, 4, 10, 18, 23; 89:10; Song 2:1, 35). The other gods attempted to battle with the dragon and struggled 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).

Yahweh on His Throne as Sovereign King

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. In contrast, Yahweh is king over the world because He has conquered chaos, and there is no continued contest.

Archeologists have found images of Marduk, Ba'al, 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.

Isa. 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 keep the chaos subdued and evil in check.

Psalm 29:3,10

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

³ Jon D. Levenson. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 12.

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. Ps. 74:12-17 and Ps. 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, whom no one and nothing can touch or threaten.

Psalm 24

- 1 Yahweh 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 Yahweh,
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?
Yahweh who is strong and mighty!
Yahweh 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?
Yahweh who commands armies!
He is the majestic king! (Selah)

Ps. 93 also shows Yahweh's reign over the world and His mastery over the sea, at the same time showing there is still a conflict between Yahweh and the sea in His creation.

- 1 Yahweh reigns!
He is robed in majesty,
Yahweh 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 Yahweh,
the waves roar,

the waves roar and crash.

- 4 Above the sound of the surging water,
and the mighty waves of the sea,
Yahweh sits enthroned in majesty.
- 5 The rules you set down are completely reliable.
Holiness aptly adorns your house, O Yahweh, forever.

In Ps. 93:3 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 Ps. 93:4 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.

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 the *satan* ("the adversary")⁴ 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. "Yahweh does not restrain his anger; under him the helpers of *Rahab* lie crushed." As already mentioned, Job 26:12 shows that it is Yahweh 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 chaos and suffering. 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 God. Likewise, the whole intention of the speech is that there is no one except Yahweh who can contend with the leviathan. "Who is he, then, who can stand before it?" (Job 41:10). The fact that there is no animal that man has not captured or conquered rules this out as a 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.

⁴ In the Hebrew it is "the *satan*," which merely means "the adversary." This is not the specific name for Satan, nor is Satan ever mentioned by name in the First Testament. Names are never preceded by the article "the"—e.g., the David, the Abraham. "The *satan*" is used in many places in a negative and neutral way of many different kinds of adversaries including humans, angels, and even God as simply someone who was opposing another as their adversary. Whether this is actually Satan in the book of Job is a discussion this paper is not dealing with here.

What is fierce and overwhelming to man is merely a plaything to Yahweh (Job 41:3-5), unlike with Ba'al and Marduk. Yahweh sees the chaos 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, 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. 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 which Anat claimed to have destroyed.⁵

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* (Ps. 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 (Ps. 18:4-17; 46:3-4; 68:22; 144:5-7).

Divine Conflict with the Sea in Daniel

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

⁵ See John Day. *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, pp. 75-84.

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.

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 Rev. 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 Lk. 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 Rev. 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 (Isa. 24:21-23); of the great banquet and the celebration of the demise of death (Isa. 25:6-8); of the resurrection of the dead (Isa. 26:19); and the restoration of Yahweh's people (Isa. 27:12-13). Isa. 27:1 is the climax of this section with the ultimate annihilation of the leviathan.

Isaiah 27:1

At that time Yahweh 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 Isa. 27:1 there is promise and 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 (Rev. 19:1-3; 19:11-20:15), the great banquet (Rev. 19:6-9), the resurrection (Rev. 20:4-6, 11-13), and the annihilation of death (Rev. 20:14-15; 21:4), as well as 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).

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. In a culture like this, it is very important for Yahweh to present Himself in a way that the people would understand and 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 culture's language He relates to them, and through His sovereignty He is able to make it about Him once again. At the same time, He strips the images of their myth and their supernatural godlike or monster-like being, and they become merely things of His creation that bear no threat to His being or kingship because He is the sovereign creator over all things.

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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