

**Symbolism and Fantasy of the Biblical *Leviathan*:
From Monster of the Abyss to Redeemer of the Prophets**

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Abstract:

The legendary biblical monster of the deep known as Leviathan was part and parcel of the destructive forces that sought to annihilate the world. Yet, according to another popular Jewish belief, a similar sea creature is associated with the spiritual idea of repentance and rebirth. This article examines the Leviathan/whale image and its cultural depiction in ancient Jewish literature, as well as its influence on medieval Christianity. I contend that the roots of the Leviathan image in western society grew and spread over the centuries, becoming an integral part of traditional lore, as well as religious ethos, in different cultures. Each society depicted the legendary creature in a distinct manner in response to its own collective primal fears, kneading it into a source of strength and hope in times of anguish. In other words, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the image of the giant monster ultimately serves as a source of strength and consolation, whether it is defeated (as in ancient pagan civilizations), controlled (as in Judaism), or brandished as a threat of punishment for sinners (as in Christianity).

Keywords:

Leviathan/whale, collective primal fears, Jewish tradition, monotheist thought, spiritual idea

According to the ancient Jewish tradition, when God created the world He fought the terrible sea monster — Leviathan. In the end of days, a bitter battle will take place between the Creator and the beast, and eventually God will destroy Leviathan. This act will symbolize the end of the world, as we know it and the beginning of a new utopian era. This thought contrasts the biblical story of Creation as described in the Book of Genesis, according to which “God created the great sea monsters” (Gen. 1:21). Legend has it that when God wished to create the world, He first had to wage war on the creatures of the abyss and the darkness so as to force them to submit to His authority and allow Him to impose order in the form of the Creation. He began by commanding the darkness to disappear and make way for the light, and then went out to fight the creatures that lived in the depths of nothingness. First, God crushed Rahab, a giant that controlled the ancient waters, and dispatched it to the bottom of the sea.¹ He then turned his attention to Leviathan. Leviathan is said to have been a sea monster with as many eyes as the days of the year, scales that shone like the sun, massive jaws, a mouth that spewed fire and flames, nostrils that breathed smoke, and eyes that sprayed jets of light.² This colossal creature moved across the seas leaving a glowing wake, or else remained in the depths of the ocean boiling the water and producing steam.³

The legendary monster of the deep known as Leviathan was part and parcel of the destructive forces that sought to annihilate the world. Yet, according to another popular Jewish tradition, a similar sea creature, described as a “big fish,” is associated not with chaotic destruction, but rather with the spiritual idea of repentance and rebirth. The first, and undoubtedly the most familiar, example that comes to mind, elevates from the biblical story of Jonah the sinning prophet (written after 530 BCE), who was swallowed by what in the collective imagination is commonly thought to be a whale (in Hebrew: leviathan), and miraculously, by God’s mercy, survived the ordeal. According to the biblical story, the prophet spent three days and three nights in the dark belly of the fish, until he recognized what he had never truly been willing to see before, the depths of God’s compassion. It was then that Jonah repented and the fish spit him out on the shores of Nineveh (Jon 2:1-10).

Jewish tradition attributes considerable importance to the powerful image of the legendary Leviathan. Not only is the creature mentioned six times in the Bible,⁴ but it later appears no less than 828 times in Talmudic discussions, in Aggadah midrashim (Jewish legends), in prayer books, in early and later commentaries, in the Kabbalah, in Zohar, and in Hasidic sources, and it is even represented on wooden engravings decorating holy arks in synagogues.⁵

This article examines the Leviathan/whale image and its cultural depiction in ancient Jewish literature (grounded on the biblical foundations), as well as its later influence on medieval Christianity. I will begin by presenting the sea creature's scientific classification as determined by ancient, medieval, and contemporary scholars, and its common conception as a whale. I will then consider its significant, yet puzzling polar, image in the collective Jewish memory: an active, destructive monster seeking to challenge God's dominion on the one hand, and a passive, obedient creature that allowed God to use him as a tool for spiritual uplift on the other.

I contend that the roots of the Leviathan/whale image in western society grew and spread over the centuries, becoming an integral part of traditional lore, as well as religious ethos, in different cultures. Each society depicted the legendary creature in a distinct manner in response to its own collective primal fears, kneading it into a source of strength and hope in times of anguish. In other words, I will attempt to demonstrate that the image of the giant monster ultimately serves as a source of strength and consolation, whether it is defeated (as in ancient pagan civilizations), controlled (as in Judaism), or brandished as a threat of punishment for sinners (as in Christianity).

The Sea Monster in the Bible and in Myth

Commentators are unanimous in the opinion that the Bible does not use "leviathan" in its Hebrew literal meaning of "whale," but rather in reference to an ancient, mythological sea creature, although the notion of a struggle between the almighty, omnipotent God and any creature, no matter how powerful, is not entirely clear. The parallels between the Biblical monster and the one of earlier pagan civilization myth are suggestive, particularly after the Ras Shamra Tablets were discovered in the archeological excavations on the site of the ancient north Syrian city of Ugarit, in 1929. The resemblance of the core elements in both narratives raises intriguing questions.⁶

At the center of the Mesopotamian myth, written in cuneiform script of the mid-fourteenth century BCE, is the battle for the throne between Ba'al, the Acadian-Babylonian storm and fertility god, and Yahm, god of the sea and the rivers. In this ferocious cosmic conflict, Ba'al and his sister, Anat, smite the fierce sea monster, a creature with five names or epithets representing either one or two beings: Yahm/Nahar; Tunnan/Tannin; the Snake; the Powerful One; and the seven-headed serpent Lotan, a cognate for the Hebrew Leviathan.⁷ Another relevant text is the Babylonian epic *Enūma Eliš*, where, again, the tale of the sea-conquering deity is a powerful and primal narrative.

Yet, while the first story describes a conflict over the conquest of the sea and does not include cosmogonic elements, the second is the mixture of a creation story with a struggle for domination over the sea and the land. The central episode of the Babylonian poem is the fight between the great god Niburo (Marduk) and Tehom (Ti`amat), the feminine embodiment of the primeval salty ocean. Note that the Hebrew word “tehom” (תהום), as used in Genesis, refers to the world *ex nihilo* (before Creation), and in contemporary Hebrew denotes the deepest depths (חוּשך על פני תהום).⁸ Both stories describe the “waters” gathered together as one entity, and the bitter struggle of the god to cut the sky from the sea in order to divide them.⁹ Thus, in both the ancient Mesopotamian myths and the Biblical text, the “waters” appears to serve not merely as a symbol of the realm of the dead and deep darkness, but more generally as a symbol of the world of the sea and the forces of nature.¹⁰ The battle is therefore a means for the Hebrew God, as well as for the Mesopotamian gods, to create order in the universe and dominate the powers of chaos that are responsible for the raging floodwaters. In other words, both narratives present a visualization of the tension between the forces of light, the spirit of God that hovers above, and the forces of darkness, the spirits of the abyss and its creatures below. In the Biblical conception, water and darkness are perceived as being formed from the same rudimentary, primeval, chaotic material. On the second day of Creation, the waters were divided into the water above, the divine forces of light striving to maintain order, and the water below, the dark forces of pre-Creation aspiring to return to the primordial chaos, to bring about the end of days when the rising water will burst its banks and flood the land with the sea creatures within it.¹¹ It is these waters that are suppressed by the might of God, as described several times in the Bible.¹² Consider, for example, Ps 104: 6-9:

You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.

As the story continues, the groundwater sea forces (the meaning of the Babylonian Tiamat, Canaanite Zewel-Yam or the Hattian dragon Illuyankas) seek to destroy the universe by covering it with water, and are stopped by the Canaanite Ba'al, the storm god, or the Babylonian Bel-Marduk. After overcoming the mutiny of the water, the victorious

god becomes king. Allusions to this battle seem to appear in the Bible. The closest likeness is in Psalms 93:3-4, where the crowning of God is demonstrated by presenting His mighty force overcoming the “thunders of mighty waters.”¹³ In Psalms 104:6-9, God’s rebuke keeps the water within the boundaries set for it, so that it will not endanger the world.¹⁴

In etiological terms, the image of the seasonal stormy-weather battle in early Babylonian and Canaanite myths probably evolved because it was created by people who lived near the Mediterranean coast and feared the waves crashing against the shore and threatening to destroy their homes. In the Babylonian story, Marduk and his storm gods kill Tiamat and cut her body in half; with one half he creates the sky, seals it carefully, and places guards to keep watch that the water does not leak (En. El. 4, lines 138-140).¹⁵ During the ferocious battle, Tiamat, herself a sea monster, creates terrifying creatures to wage war on her behalf during the offspring gods’ rebellion, such as sharp-toothed crocodiles, dragons, serpents, a wild dog, a giant lion, a fish, a hippopotamus, and other repulsive demons. As the young gods are frightened by the strength of Tiamat and her cohorts, Marduk volunteers to fight her on condition that he is crowned king of the gods. Once he becomes king, Marduk is armed with the weapons he himself created for this battle (En. El. 4, lines 93-104). While the result of the battle may be predictable, what is fascinating is the nature of the creatures who take part in it. These frightening sea monsters represent the mysterious aspects of the ocean (the sea as a living creature) across cultures.

Echoes of the same legendary confrontation, the struggle between God and a monster of the depths, can also be found in the Bible in the books of Isaiah, Psalms, Amos, and Job. Job, who curses the day and the night, describes the moment when the sea monster, Leviathan, will awake with great anger from his deep sleep, liberate himself from his shackles in the darkness at the bottom of the great sea, and cause an eclipse or floods: “Let those curse it that curse the day, who are ready to arouse Leviathan” (Job 3:8).¹⁶ The continuation of the struggle can be seen in Job’s description of the great battle that will take place between God and the monster (Job 41:19-31):

From its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out. Out of its nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth. In its neck abides strength, and terror dances before it. The folds of its flesh cling together; it is firmly cast and immovable. Its heart is as hard as stone, as hard as the lower millstone... Its

underparts are like sharp potsherds; it spreads itself like a threshing sledge on the mire. It makes the deep boil like a pot; it makes the sea like a pot of ointment.

According to legend, God ordered Gabriel to pull Leviathan from the Great Sea (the Mediterranean). Although Gabriel succeeded in catching it with his hook, he is swallowed up in the attempt to pull it out on to dry land, whereupon God himself is obliged to seize the monster, and slays it in the presence of the pious. In the world to come (Ha'olam Haba), the meat of Leviathan (the supreme sea beast) will be eaten at the messianic banquet, along with that of two other beasts: Behemoth (the supreme land mammal) and Ziz (the griffin-like, supreme air animal). The skin of Leviathan will be used as a tent to shelter the festivities.¹⁷ Note that unlike the Mesopotamian stories that focus solely on sea battles, the Jewish narrative includes creatures representing the sea, the earth, and the air,¹⁸ indicating God's dominion over the entire universe.



Behemoth and Leviathan
William Blake (1825)

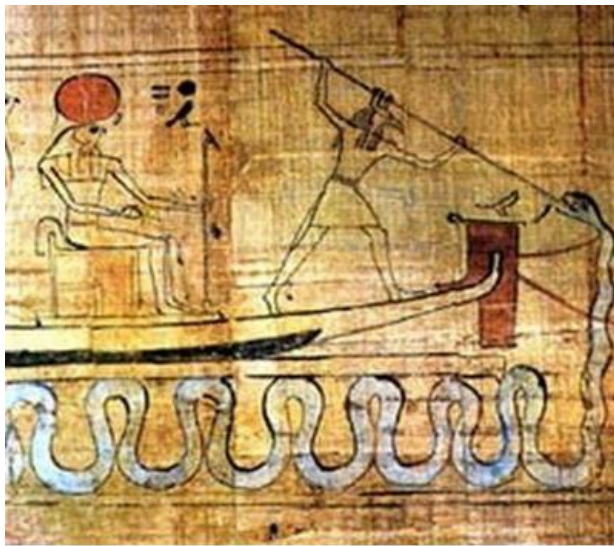


Leviathan, Behemoth and Ziz
Bible illustration, Ulm, Germany (1238)

The Nature of the Beast

From both the Egyptian-Mesopotamian and Biblical descriptions it is still difficult to

determine precisely what type of creature Lotan/Leviathan was meant to be. Shupak asserts that the Mesopotamian tradition was deliberately obscure, as the Egyptians believed their myth to contain secrets of wisdom and magical medicinal formulae, among other things, the disclosure of which could be dangerous. Consequently, the myths were not written down, but rather relayed orally, and only a select few knew how to decipher them.¹⁹ Indeed, the Egyptians sought to heal a variety of diseases by means of magic spells that often compared the patient's condition with mythological events from the distant past. Shupak refers to at least three such spells in which the disease is compared to the sea, using its Egyptian name *Yam* (the "great green" waters), the enemy of God. According to the spells, just as the sea/chaotic snake/crocodile was defeated by the god Seth, the disease will be eliminated from the human body.²⁰



Seth helps Ra to fight the evil serpent Apep
Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Based on the Biblical midrashim, it can be assumed that seafarers in ancient times saw whales drawing in sea water together with their food, and then exhaling the water in a jet from the blowhole on their backs.²¹ This phenomenon may have led to the mistaken image of a giant mythological fire-spitting whale-like creature.

Another animal that may have inspired the myth is the crocodile, whose biological features may be seen in the portrayal of the beast's glittering scales and eyes shining like torches from the water. Moreover, the Hebrew word for crocodile, *tannin*, appears in the

Bible in reference to a sea monster, as in Isaiah 27:1: "וְהָרַג אֶת הַתַּנִּין אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם", translated in the NRSV as dragon. Zoologically speaking, the crocodile does not inhabit the ocean (Yam/ים), but rather rivers, and indeed, Ezekiel 29:3 directly points at the great crocodile that is in the Nile river: "הַתַּנִּים הַגְּדוֹל, הָרֹבֵץ בְּתוֹךְ אַרְיֵי : אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לִי יְהוָה".²² The Prophet Ezekiel refer to the Great Pharaoh as "hattannīn haggādōl" [the great Crocodile that lies in the midst of the Nile], but here again the NRSV does not translate it literally, but uses the more general term, "the great dragon sprawling in the midst of its channels."

The monstrous reptile might, in fact, be a reference to the crocodile, which can reach up to seven meters in length, and was one of the largest and most intimidating creatures known in ancient times. The fearsome crocodiles and their bitter struggle with God are mentioned again in Psalms 74:13: שִׁבַּרְתָּ רֵאשֵׁי תַנִּינִים עַל הַמַּיִם [you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters]. The term appears to relate to a creature similar to the fish-like Leviathan, as both are described as sea monsters that live in darkness in the depths of the ocean, as in Isaiah 51:9-10:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD! Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon [Hebrew: tannin]? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?

Although large crocodiles were a serious threat in the ancient world, the Egyptians regarded them as sacred, and it was forbidden to harm them. Moreover, while it may be assumed that very few people actually saw a whale, many are likely to have seen a real crocodile. They are often depicted in Egyptian sources with only their eyes protruding from the shallow water, waiting for the right moment to attack a person who has come to bathe in the Nile.

Another creature whose name is occasionally used instead of, or in conjunction with, Leviathan is the serpent: "On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea." (Isaiah 27:1).²³ This hints at an Ugaritic cognate: "When you smote Lotan, the fleeing serpent; Annihilated the twisting serpent; the dominant one who has seven heads" (KTU 1.3; 1.5).

In the Babylonian Talmud (A.D. 257-320), Rabbi Yochanan suggests that the sea

monster was originally thought to possess the qualities of a serpent rather than a fish (Baba Batra, 74b). Citing the above Biblical verse, he interprets it to mean that God created a male (piercing serpent) and female (crooked serpent) Leviathan, and killed the female to prevent them from mating and destroying the world.

Although the context speaks of serpents or some similar sinuous reptiles, Aïcha Rahmouni suggests that the most likely etymology is the Akkadian word *šalātu*, meaning “to rule, to be in authority,” and it does not necessarily refer to a snake as we know it.²⁴ Another interpretation is offered by Shupak, who points out that the original Egyptian word *snk* means crocodile, while the word *skn* means “lack of satiety, greed and lust.” She therefore suggests that the reference is to the gluttonous nature of the imaginary crocodile-like monster. Alternatively, it may be a characterization of the 30 meter long anti-God snake Apopis.²⁶ The Jewish tractate Idra Zuta supports this claim, presuming Leviathan to represent not a specific beast, but rather the principal rival in the confrontation between divine forces of equal strength.

Leviathan as a reptile in Jewish tradition

Interestingly enough, while the NRSV Bible repeatedly translates the Hebrew “tannin” as “dragon,” there is also a Hebrew word for “dragon” that is used in both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmud. However, the Hebrew dragon refers to a lizard, snake, or the image of such an animal on pottery. In fact, in ancient Jewish culture, the dragon was thought to belong to the family of reptiles, and was no more exceptional than any other common lizard or small poisonous snake. The Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, page 56a +b (also in *Avot De'Rabi Natan*, Version 1, Chapter 4), for instance, which tells of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai’s departure from Jerusalem and the establishment of the center at Yavne, contains the following exchange:

אמר לו (אספסיאנוס) : חבית של דבש, ודרקון כרוך עליה – לא היו שוברין החבית בשביל דרקון? שתק (רבן יוחנן בן זכאי). קרא עליו רב יוסף – ויש אומרים רבי עקיבא : “משיב חכמים אחר ודעתם יסכל” (ישעיהו, מד, כ”ה) שהיה צריך לומר לו : נוטלין צבת ומסלקין את הדרקון והורגין אותו, ואת החבית מניחין.

[If you find a **dragon** on a barrel of honey...remove the **dragon** and use the utensil.]



Lizard: Varanus (Psammosaurus) griesus

A further reference to the dragon appears in the Mishnah, where it is clearly understood to be a symbol of idolatry, most likely the personification of one of the earth gods or the gods of the otherworld. The discussion centers around the question of whether a Jew who finds a utensil on which the form of a dragon has been drawn is entitled to make use of the object.²⁶

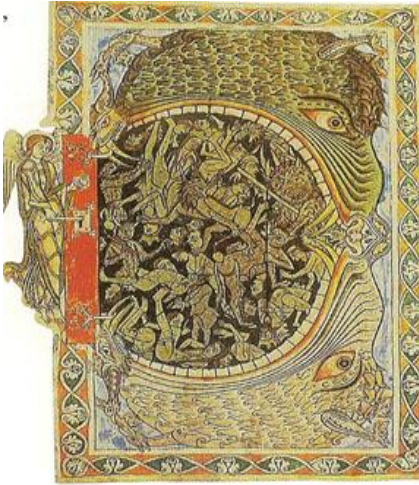
In the Biblical context, the word “dragon” appears for the first time in the Septuagint and the Vulgate as the translation of the Hebrew “serpent” into which Aaron’s rod was transformed before the eyes of Pharaoh (Ex. 7:12).²⁷ The dragon can be found in Hellenic sources as well, where “draca” also means snake. Medea, for example, fled from Corinth after slaying her children in a huge chariot drawn by flying serpents/drakones (δράκων).



Dragon-chariot of Medea, Lucanian red-figure dated ca. 400 BCE, Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio

The Sea Monster in Christian Tradition

The forces of the depths of the ocean thus appear in Judeo-Christian stories not in the context of a struggle against the forces of nature, but rather as part of an iconic struggle of God and his angels against the devil and his emissaries. Biblical bestiary drawings from the 12-13th century clearly portray monstrous man-eating beasts similar in appearance to a giant whale.²⁸ In Christian depictions, the sea monster is not only seen swallowing up sinners, but the belly of the whale is often used to represent Hell, with the whale's jaws corresponding to the gates of Hell.



Water monster swallowing sinners, angel standing at its side, locking its jaws.
Illustration of Psalm by Henri de Blois, 1161²⁹



Saint Jean sees the Devil swallowing the false prophets.
France, 1220-70. Miniature, Apocalypse Bible of Toulouse

The motif of a terrifying sea beast fired the imagination of medieval monks, who developed it into a plethora of images of animals of various kinds who shatter people's bones, poison their bodies, and chew them up, spit them out, and chew them up again. These animals included worms, giant poisonous toads, twisting snakes, and crocodiles. Some of the images show the creature's eyes shining with the glow of the devil or emerging from the earth and spitting fire on innocent people for no apparent reason.³⁰ According to Salisbury, "this image continues through the visionary literature of the Middle Ages until the best-known image portrayed in Dante's *Inferno*, where Lucifer in the pit of hell eternally eats the souls of those who betrayed their masters."³¹ This might

be understood as the paradox of martyrdom. In order to demonstrate his victory over the fear of being eaten by the beast, the saint expresses his eagerness to have his flesh ground by the beast's teeth and be consumed in death as an essential part of salvation: "Ignatius through his martyrdom ...become[s] Christ's food, and thus part of Christ's body (as the food gets incorporated into the flesh of the consumer). Then by becoming part of the body of Christ, the saint achieves the victory over death, decay, and becoming food for (and transformed into) the hungry beast that ground his flesh."³² Salisbury concludes that these stories "reinforce the deeply held fears of being eaten, which is after all, the human fear of death."³³

Jonah and the Whale

The image of the mighty beast swallowing sinners in medieval Christian iconography is frequently associated with the Biblical sea monster, Leviathan. Yet it is also possible that a completely different source contributed to the crystallization of this image: the "big fish" that swallowed Jonah, which is commonly conceived of as a whale. The story of Jonah Ben-Amittai, written after 530 BCE, tells of the mission given to Jonah the Prophet by God: he is to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and urge its population to repent. But Jonah can not open his heart to accept his destiny, and he attempts to flee. In response, God calls up a storm and commands the most frightening creature of the sea to swallow the sinner. Three days later, it vomits Jonah safely onto the beach, restoring his faith and obedience.



Pieter Lastman (1621), *Jonah and the Whale*
Museum kunstpalast, Dusseldorf

In her book, *Prophetic Adventure: Jonah as the Liar of Truth*, Ruth Reichelberg's basic assumption is that in the universal collective memory, the "big fish" is a whale. Ask anyone in the street "Who is Jonah?" she says, and the answer will surely be, "He's the one who was swallowed by the whale." In other words, "Qui dit Jonah dit baleine" [Talking about Jonah is talking about a whale], she claims, adding that he is the ancestor of Little Red Riding Hood and Pinocchio.³⁴

In all three monotheistic religions, Jonah is regarded primarily as the prophet of rebirth, a symbol of rising from the dead and salvation through an inner journey. In later medieval Christian thought, he represents the suffering of the martyr, death, and rebirth; in Islam (where he is Yūnus يُونُس in the Quran), he is a symbol of the suicide-prophet; and in Jewish tradition his story is an allegory for achieving spiritual purpose and redemption. In *The City of God* (XVIII: 30), Saint Augustine speculates whether Jonah's experience is itself a prophetic vision of the resurrection of Christ: "The Prophet Jonah, not so much by speech as by his own painful experience, prophesied Christ's death and resurrection much more clearly than if he had proclaimed them with his voice. For why was he taken into the whale's belly and restored on the third day, but that he might be a sign that Christ should return from the depths of hell on the third day?"³⁵ In Jewish tradition, the Book of Jonah, known as the Maftir Yona, is read at the closing of the service on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It is meant to strengthen faith in redemption (geula), and teach that one can not escape from God in their wrongdoing, as stated in Psalms 139:7: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" Man is obligated to repent, just like the people of Nineveh, who achieved salvation after they mended their ways.³⁶

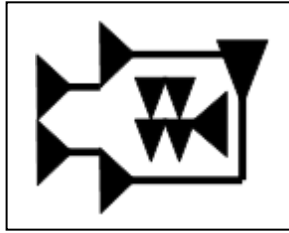
Although the theme of a hero confronting a sea monster is virtually universal and can be found in almost all ancient cultures, the Biblical story appears to have special meaning for all monotheistic religions due to its unique features. Unlike the usual hero/sea beast tales, the fish in the story of Jonah is neither his rival nor his enemy. Moreover, when Jonah undergoes the prophetic experience, he would no longer seem to be a young man, that is, he is not in a stage in his life when he has to prove his physical strength or skills as a warrior. On the contrary, he does his utmost to avoid his obligations as a prophet, tries to flee as far from the scene of confrontation as possible, and eventually is completely indifferent to the sailors' intent to throw him overboard, "so they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea" (Jon 1:15). He might even be said to have a death wish. According to the Bible: "He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you" (Jon 1:12), and later explicitly begs

God to “And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jon 4:3). Furthermore, in contrast to the negative connotations of the medieval Christian allegory, being swallowed by the “big fish” plays a positive role in Jonah’s existential ordeal. Reichelberg sees a direct correlation between the completion of his mission to the people of Nineveh, his physical condition (in the belly of the fish) and the feminine identity of the whale/big fish,³⁷ basing this assumption on the use in Jonah 2:1-2 not only of the Hebrew word for “fish” dag (דג), but also of its feminine form — daga (דגה)

וַיְהִי יוֹנָה בַּמַּעֵי הַדָּג, שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לַיְלוֹת; וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה, אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתָיו, מִמַּעַי, הַדָּגָה.

[and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,]

Reichelberg also notes the non-coincidental similarity between the name Jonah (Hebrew יוֹנָה [Yona], spelled yud-vav-nun-hee) and the name of the city, Nineveh (Hebrew נִינְוָה, spelled nun-yud-nun-vav-hee).³⁸ The resemblance is an essential link in the chain of the prophet’s spiritual uplifting, and his circumstances an emblem of his mental state. The sailors, marveling at his ability to sleep in the midst of the tempest, ask Jonah: “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god!” (Jon 1:6). Earlier, he is ordered by God: “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” (Jon. 1:2). The parallel suggests that Jonah is being ordered to wake up, not physically, but rather from his mental stupor.³⁹ Thus, one might argue that Jonah begins by ignoring his divine duty, goes through an initiation process in a womb-like environment, and ultimately undergoes a process of rebirth. Once enlightened, after three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, he prays to God to save him. God hears his cry, and in an act resembling childbirth, delivers him safely to shore. Unlike all other known man-versus-sea beast stories, here the fish has no intention of consuming Jonah, but rather is humbly obeying God’s request to serve as a tool in the prophet’s education, for “the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah” (Jon 1:17). Benjamin Gezuntheid notes that the symbol of Nineveh in the original cuneiform script is a fish in a house, as the city’s economy was based on fishing. He adds that in Hebrew as well, the name Nineveh means fish house (nin [נִינ] fish, and navee [נִוָּה] house).⁴⁰



Symbol of the city of Nineveh in cuneiform inscription

Gezuntheid interprets this as a divine message that even the other nations of the world can earn the mercy of God if they repent their wrongdoing.

Jonah, however, is unwilling to receive the message, and does his best to flee from his obligation. Ironically, he attempts to escape from the city that is identified as “the house of the fish,” only to be swallowed up, by God’s order, by a fish who protects him until he “wakes from his sleep” and is able to carry out his duty toward that city, the city whose name resembles his own.⁴¹

Two Creatures, One Message

Thus, as we have seen, although it is often treated as a single construct, there are actually two different versions of the legendary sea beast. The first is the monster Leviathan, the Canaanite emblem of chaos who threatens to flood the earth with water that was adopted by Jewish as well as by Christian tradition in the form of the enemy of God, who represents order. This terrifying sea monster seeks relentlessly to thwart all efforts at progress, growth, or prosperity, whether human or divine in the Jewish collective memory while it reflects the ultimate sinners’ punishment in the later Christian interpretations. The second, as conveyed in the story of Jonah, is an entirely different creature, a protective, obedient denizen of the sea sent by God to protect the hero from himself as part of his initiation process. Yet, despite being represented as polar opposites, in many ways the two creatures are one and the same. Both are traditionally identified with the whale (the Hebrew leviathan), and both are used to epitomize the ultimate struggle between man and his fate, and even more significantly, to establish the sovereignty of the Creator.

The willingness of the hero to confront the harsh and unforgiving seas, or in other words, the irresistible attraction of the forces of chaos, is related repeatedly across cultures and eras. In respect to the human hero or demigod, Seneca best describes this

theme as a need: “Avida est periculi virtus” [Bravery is keen for danger].⁴² As for the religious implications of the narrative, one might ask whether the dominion of the Creator is best demonstrated solely through tales of combat. Perhaps the message is better conveyed through narratives that illustrate the immutable connections between opposite elements: not just good and evil, but also mental and physical courage on the one hand, and extreme fear on the other.

Notes

- ¹ “You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.” (Ps. 89:10). Unless otherwise specified, all Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
- ² “I saw a great light on the sea. He said to him: Perhaps you saw the eyes of Leviathan,” Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Batra, Page 74, Column 2.
- ³ “Out of its nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth.” (Job 41:20-21).
- ⁴ Is 27:1 (twice); Ps 74:14; Ps 104:26; Job 3:8; Job 40:23-24.
- ⁵ For a complete database, See: The Responsa Project: Global Jewish Database, Bar Ilan University. <http://responsa.biu.ac.il>.
- ⁶ On the comparison between the Biblical text and the Ugarit text, see, inter alia: H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, Göttingen (1894); W.G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” in *Babylonian and Israel* (Edited by H.P. Müller; Darmstadt, 1991), 94-113; S.E. Loewenstamm, *Comparative Studies in Biblical and Ancient Oriental Literature* (AOAT 204) (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1980), 346-361, 465-470; J. Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985); also, compare with God’s Battle with the Sea according to Egyptian Sources, in: Nili Shupak, “He Subdued the Water Monster/Crocodile,” in *Iyunei mikra ve-parshanut*, (Vol. 10; Edited by M. Garciel et al.; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2011), 325-342 [in Hebrew].
- ⁷ “Because thou didst smite Lotan, the evil serpent; The mighty one of seven heads” (KTU2 1.3 II: 5-8). Mark S. Smith, “The Ugaritic Baal Cycle: Volume 1” of KTU 1.1-1.2. in *Vetus Testamentum Supplements series* (Vol. 55; Leiden: Brill, 1994); “The Ugaritic Baal Cycle: Volume 2,” in *Vetus Testamentum Supplement series* (Vol. 114. Leiden: Brill, 2008); <http://web.archive.org/web/20080115123739/http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/2938/mythobaal.htm>; Sema’an I. Salem and Lynda A. Salem, *The Near East: The Cradle of Western Civilization* (Bloomington, IN: Writers Club Press, 2000).
- ⁸ In Akkadian literature, the monster goddess’s name is spelled Ti`amat, the same as in Canaanite, but is pronounced Ti`aw(w)at, which most probably did not sound to the ancient Hebrews like a parallel of the Hebrew “tehom.” On the other hand, Akkad and Sumerian myths attribute the dominance of the sea to Absu, god of the sweet water, which is probably the source of the English word “abyss,” so transition with lingual adjustments between cultures

can be suggested.

This paper is based primarily on the translation: Edited by W.G. Lambert and S.B. Parker, *Enuma Elis: The Babylonian Epic of Creation: The Cuneiform Text* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1966); see also: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 1993), 351-402; Benjamin R. Foster, "Epic of Creation," in *The Context of Scripture, Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr.; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 390-402.

- ⁹ "And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'" (Gen 1:6); mēšunu ištēniš inhhīqūma [mingled their water together] (En. El. I, line 5). Unless otherwise specified, Enuma Elis is cited here in normalized form from the composite cuneiform edition of Lambert and Parker; for a discussion of these lines, see: Piotr Michalowski, "Presence at the Creation," in *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Edited by T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard et al.; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 383-384; and online, in academia.edu, at: http://umich.academia.edu/PiotrMichalowski/Papers/466309/Presence_at_the_Creation
- ¹⁰ Compare with Eliade, who suggests that the taming of the water motif, common in many traditions, stands universally for the eternal return of the moment of creation, that is, the cosmogonic conquest of chaos and establishment of order. M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (translated by W. Trask; Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), chapter 2.
- ¹¹ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Vol. 5; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1998 [1925]), 16-17.
- ¹² See also: Ps 29:3; 33:7; 65:5; 77:17-21; 135:6; 89:9-10; Job 26: 12.
- ¹³ "The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!" (Ps 93:3-4).
- ¹⁴ Other references to the struggle between the mighty forces can be found in Gen 1:2, 1:6-10, 1:20-21, and even more clearly in Isa 51:9-10 and in Ps 29:10.
- ¹⁵ Compare with: Job 38:8-10: "'Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?...and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors,"
- ¹⁶ See also Ps 74:14, and Amos Haham's commentary on the Book of Job (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute).
- ¹⁷ Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*; see also: Baba Batra 74b, 75a.
- ¹⁸ See also the dream visions in the deuterocanonical books of Baruch and Ezra: " ובהמות יגלה ממוקומו ולויתן יעלה מן היס הם שני התנינים הגדולים אשר בראתי ביום החמישי לבריאה ואשמרם עד הזמן ההוא ואז יהיו למאכל לכל-אשר ישארו." Apocalypse of Baruch A (propheta Baruchi) 29:4; see also, Apocalypses of Ezra (propheta Ezra) 4:49-52.
- ¹⁹ Shupak, "He Subdued the Water Monster/Crocodile," 327, note 6.
- ²⁰ Shupak, 330-331; see also: A Massart, *The Leiden Magical Papyrus* (I 343+ I 345, suppl. OMRO, 1954), 16-17, 64-67.
- ²¹ See: Menachem Dor, *Fauna in the Era of the Scriptures: the Mishnah, and the Talmud* (Tel Aviv: Graph Or-Daphtal, 1977), 74-76.

- ²² It should be noted that the creature is mentioned by several prophets, yet some of the biblical Hebrew indications of the term “Tanim” (תנים) and “Tanin” (תנין) might be confusing. For example: “וַתִּכְבְּדֵנוּ עֲלֵינוּ בְּצַלְמוֹת; וַתִּכְסֵנוּ בְּמִקּוֹם תַּנִּים;” [yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness.] (Ps 44:19). From the Hebrew script, it is not clear whether it seeks to address the sea creatures or the wild Jackal, unlike some biblical indications, where the exact referred beast can be understood by its context, as in Isaiah 43:20: “וְהַיָּתֵהּ הַצּוֹר לְמַעַן תַּנִּים שְׂמָמָה” [The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches], and in Jer 49: 33: “וְהָיְתָה הַצּוֹר לְמַעַן תַּנִּים שְׂמָמָה” [Hazor shall become a lair of jackals, an everlasting waste]. Both indicate the Zoological wild beast that lived mostly in uninhabited desert areas. While elsewhere, the same word is used to describe the Nile crocodile, for example, in Eze 29:3, mentioned here, and again in Eze 32:2: “וְאֵתָהּ, כְּתַנִּים” “Tanim bayamim” means the crocodile that is in the waters.
- ²³ Here again, “dragon” is a translation of the Hebrew “tannin.”
- ²⁴ Aicha Rahmouni, *Divine Epithets in the Ugaritic Alphabetic Texts* (translated by J. N. Ford; Leiden: Brill: 2007), 302-333.
- ²⁵ Nili Shupak, *Where Can Wisdom Be Found? The Sage’s Language in the Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Freiburg Schweiz: University Press, 1993), 108-110, 114-116; on Apopis, see for example: L.D. Morenz, “Apopis: On the Origin, Name, and Nature of an Ancient Egyptian Anti-God” (JNES 63, 2004), 201-205; J.F. Borghouts, “The Evil Eye of Apopis,” in *Journal of Egyptian Archeology* 59 (1973), 114-150.
- ²⁶ See, Mishnah Avoda Zara 3.3, Jerusalem Talmud Avoda Zara 3.3, 43c, Babylonia Talmud Avoda Zara 43a: “There are those who claim that the utensil should be destroyed because it is improper to use it, and there are those who say that each utensil should be assessed on its merits. The drawing appearing on it should be examined; some are permitted, others forbidden.”
- ²⁷ See: E.M.M. Eynikel and K. Hauspie, “The Use of ‘Dragon’ in the Septuagint,” in *Biblical Greek Language and Lexicography. Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Danker* (Edited by B. Taylor et al.; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004). See also in the Vulgate, the Latin translation: “proieceruntque singuli virgas suas quae versae sunt in **dracones** sed devoravit virga Aaron virgas eorum.”
- ²⁸ Compare *Physiologus*, (Translated by Michael J. Curley Austin; TX: University of Texas Press, 1979), 83.
- ²⁹ In Stéphane Audeguy, *Les Monstres: Si loin si proches* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 25.
- ³⁰ Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (NY: Routledge, 1994), 73; Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (NY: Italica Press, 1989), 38-41, 70.
- ³¹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 73.
- ³² Salisbury, 72.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ruth Reichelberg, *L’aventure prophétique: Jonah, menteur de Vérité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 23.
- ³⁵ Saint Augustine, *The City of God* (Translated by Marcus Dods; NY: Modern Library, [1950] 2000), 635.
- ³⁶ *Vitry Machzor*, (Berlin: S. Hurwitz edition, 1896-1897), 293-294 [in Hebrew].

³⁷ Reichelberg, *L'aventure prophétique*, 116.

³⁸ Reichelberg, 91.

³⁹ Compare with Genesis 21:17-21; Kings1 19:21.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Gezuntheid, "Iyunim be-sefer Yona" [Studies of the Book of Jonah], in <http://www.tefilah.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/03/SeferYonah.doc> [in Hebrew]. On the drawing of the name of the city of Nineveh in cuneiform inscription: R. Borger, *Assyrisch-babylonische Zeichenliste*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1978, Seite 95, Nr. 200; Seite 203, Nr. 589. According to Gezuntheid, the inner triangles in the belly of the fish denote "escape," "doom," or "plant."

⁴¹ See: Gezuntheid, *Iyunim*; R. Borger, *Assyrisch-babylonische Zeichenliste* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), Seite 95, Nr. 200; Seite 203, Nr. 589.

⁴² Seneca, *De Providentia*, 4, 4.