

JOB AND HIS DRAGON

C.M. Alvarez on the Problem of Evil

The Book of Job is one of those works that we tend to skirt around. It is as dark and murky as a dragon's cave. Job is a good man who has fallen on hard times, and he just wants one answer to his question, "Why did this happen to me?" Like us, he questions not only everything he has known in his life, but he questions God himself. The Book of Job is a dialogue of an internal conflict, a response to a challenge from the world around him, and a struggle to understand and know the God that is. Job is hard to understand because it is an apologetic work about the Problem of Evil, and any way the Problem of Evil is presented, it is difficult. In the text, God gives Job an answer, and he uses a dragon to make his point.

The Dragon in the Book of Job

People are often surprised to learn that dragons are mentioned in the Bible. As a matter of fact there is and a clear description is found in the Book of Job in chapter 41 in a description of Leviathan:

- 1 "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord?
- 2 Can you put a rope in his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?

- 3 Will he make many pleas to you?
Will he speak to you soft words?
- 4 Will he make a covenant with you
to take him for your servant forever?
- 5 Will you play with him as with a bird,
or will you put him on a leash for your
girls?
- 6 Will traders bargain over him?
Will they divide him up among the
merchants?
- 7 Can you fill his skin with harpoons
or his head with fishing spears?
- 8 Lay your hands on him;
remember the battle—you will not do it
again!
- 9 Behold, the hope of a man is false;
he is laid low even at the sight of him.
- 10 No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him
up.
Who then is he who can stand before me?
- 11 Who has first given to me, that I should
repay him?
Whatever is under the whole heaven is
mine.
- 12 “I will not keep silence concerning his
limbs,
or his mighty strength, or his goodly
frame.
- 13 Who can strip off his outer garment?
Who would come near him with a bridle?
- 14 Who can open the doors of his face?
Around his teeth is terror.

15 His back is made of rows of shields,
shut up closely as with a seal.

16 One is so near to another
that no air can come between them.

17 They are joined one to another;
they clasp each other and cannot be
separated.

18 His sneezings flash forth light,
and his eyes are like the eyelids of the
dawn.

19 Out of his mouth go flaming torches;
sparks of fire leap forth.

20 Out of his nostrils comes forth smoke,
as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.

21 His breath kindles coals,
and a flame comes forth from his mouth.

22 In his neck abides strength,
and terror dances before him.

23 The folds of his flesh stick together,
firmly cast on him and immovable.

24 His heart is hard as a stone,
hard as the lower millstone.

25 When he raises himself up, the mighty are
afraid;
at the crashing they are beside themselves.

26 Though the sword reaches him, it does not
avail,
nor the spear, the dart, or the javelin.

27 He counts iron as straw,
and bronze as rotten wood.

28 The arrow cannot make him flee;
for him, sling stones are turned to stubble.

- 29 Clubs are counted as stubble;
he laughs at the rattle of javelins.
- 30 His underparts are like sharp potsherds;
he spreads himself like a threshing sledge
on the mire.
- 31 He makes the deep boil like a pot;
he makes the sea like a pot of ointment.
- 32 Behind him he leaves a shining wake;
one would think the deep to be white-
haired.
- 33 On earth there is not his like,
a creature without fear.
- 34 He sees everything that is high;
he is king over all the sons of pride.¹

The reference to fishhooks, harpoons, and merchants indicates a creature of the sea. Leviathan is so fierce that even the sight of him lays a man low. The back of Leviathan is thick scales, "a row of shields, shut up closely as with a seal" and the creature breathes fire, his "sneezings flash forth light" and "out of his mouth go flaming torches, sparks of fire leap forth" causing the water to boil. Iron cannot prevail against him, neither arrows nor clubs. Leviathan is a creature that no man can withstand or prevail against.

The last verse in the chapter indicates that the Lord is not simply talking about a scary animal in the sea, but that the passage also references the cultural powers of Job's day. Leviathan is said to "see everything that is high" and that "he is king over all the sons of pride." What does a sea creature see that is "on high," and who

¹ Job 41 ESV.

are these “sons of pride?” If the writer of Job were only referring to a creature in the sea, the limits of Leviathan’s power would be the limits of the sea, and the deep of the sea is not “on high.” However, the belief about a powerful sea dragon does not originate with the book of Job but is drawn from the cosmology of the culture within which the writer lived. The ancient Mesopotamian culture did not believe in a sole, all-powerful God who created *ex-nihilo*, but a pantheon and the Akkadian goddess Tiamat, the goddess of the sea and of chaos.² Tiamat of the sea and Abzu of fresh water joined to produce all other gods, the “sons of pride.”³ As Brian Godawa notes in an essay on Biblical creation and storytelling,

Another way that biblical creation reflects ancient Near Eastern culture, while subverting it, is in its appropriation of what ANE scholars call the Chaokampf motif, or the creation of order out of chaos through struggle. Hermann Gunkel first suggested in *Creation and Chaos* (1895) that some ancient Near Eastern creation myths contained a cosmic conflict between deity and sea, as well as sea dragons or serpents that expressed the creation of order out of chaos. Gunkel argued that Genesis borrowed this idea from the Babylonian tale of Marduk battling the goddess Tiamat, serpent of chaos, whom he

² “Tiamat (Goddess),” Text, *The ORACC Project at University of Pennsylvania* (n.d.), accessed May 22, 2022, <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/amgg/listofdeities/tiamat/index.html>.

³ Ibid.

vanquished, and out of whose body he created the heavens and earth. Later, John Day argued in light of the discovery of the Ugarit tablets in 1928, that Canaan, not Babylonia is the source of the combat motif in Genesis, reflected in Yahweh's own complaint that Israel had become polluted by Canaanite culture. In the Baal cycle, Baal battles Yam (Sea) and conquers it, along with "the dragon," "the twisting serpent," to be enthroned as chief deity of the Canaanite pantheon.⁴

In light of the ancient Mesopotamian religion, the claim that Yahweh separated the waters in Genesis 1:6-7, setting the bounds of both the heavens and the earth, is more than an origin story, it is a call to war, a statement and a challenge that the Great I AM is over and will remain over all other beings who would challenge him. In Job 41 as well, God highlights not only the fear mortals experience when they face the physical creature, but also grounds the reference of the spiritual powers of Ephesians 6:12.⁵

Job's Journey

The story of the man named Job is one of a person who was living an ordered and orderly life when

⁴ Brian Godawa, "Biblical Creation and Storytelling: Cosmogony, Combat and Covenant" (The Biologos Foundation, n.d.),t5. https://www.fliedner.es/media/modules/editor/cienciayfe/docs/biologos/40-godawa_scholarly_paper.pdf.

⁵ Ephesians 6:12 ESV "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

calamity hit. Job was righteous. He did what he was supposed to do, he treated people as he should, and he worshiped God, but then chaos overtook his life. He lost it all: all his children, all his possessions, all his friends, and all his influence. He lost his health and his peace. It would seem that his devotion to Yahweh was of no use. It seemed that chaos had won.

When we first hear from Job in chapter 3, he is in the dark night of the soul. Job is certain that all is at an end and that there is nothing left for him other than to lay down, die, and hope that God will vindicate him in the resurrection, because the powers of evil seem to have won this round. Job may have stayed in this state of despair if not for the agitation and irritation by his well-meaning friends who are absolutely certain they know the reason Job has experienced loss. In rising to respond to the accusations of his friends, Job not only insists on his own standing but calls on God himself to vindicate him. That because God is just, he will not allow the injustice done to Job stand. Everyone else has turned against him, so with nothing left to do, Job calls upon the Lord:

23 “Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!

24 Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!

25 For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the
earth.

26 And after my skin has been thus
destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,

27 whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not
another.

My heart faints within me!⁶

Job puts his trust in his Redeemer who has the power to resurrect and restore even the dead. The power of chaos and death will not prevail.

Leviathan's Role in the Book of Job

When Job stands upon and declares this truth and his absolute trust in God as the good and just power of all, the landscape begins to shift. Job no longer argues with his friends about who is right. After all, even if Job won the argument, how would that fix the problem? Job instead looks to God alone and directly for both a response and deliverance. In chapters 26-31, Job presents his case to God and challenges God to explain himself.

Job is asking God to explain the question that all humanity has been asking since the beginning of time, "Why does a good God allow evil?" After Job's exchange with Elihu who tells Job he is getting a little full of himself thinking that his righteousness is higher than God's, God himself answers Job in chapters 38-41. Drawing Job's attention to the magnificence and the mysteries of creation, things that Job sees and interacts with on a daily basis, God asks Job if he understands

⁶ Job 19:23-27 ESV.

how all of these things came about. Then God moves on from every-day, non-threatening things like the ox and the ostrich to creatures of power like Leviathan and Behemoth. God gets serious, saying:

7 “Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known
to me.

8 Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be in
the right?⁷

“Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?” In other words, God is asking Job, “Are you willing to be wrong?” Job has considered himself a God-fearing and righteous person, but when it comes down to it, does he value his own reputation above God’s? Is he willing to admit that he is wrong, or more precisely in the case of Job, that what has come about in his life is in line with the order of God’s laws, and therefore his justice and righteousness, even if Job does not understand the reasons why?

The essence of God’s being is justice, and the world that he created runs upon it. He cannot be other than he is. All of us do things that violate God’s justice and order, and we can only call upon him for mercy. The point of God’s response to Job is that there are all these things in the world around him, including Leviathan, that Job cannot explain or control; how can Job even begin to understand the spiritual forces that govern the world?

In the case of Job, was it really about the answer to “why” all those things happened, or was it more about

⁷ Job 40:7-8 ESV.

Job wanting to be right? Between Job and his friends, Job was the only one who wanted to seek out God. But between Job and Elihu, Elihu was the one defending God's name rather than his own. Do you really want to know why, or do you just want to be right? Put another way, are you willing to be wrong? When fighting a spiritual battle, we have to be willing to humble ourselves before God in order to stand firm.

We see in the first chapters of Job that the chaos that entered Job's life was caused by spiritual forces he wasn't aware of. As Juliana Claasens points out in a discussion on the dialogue in Job, "The divine speeches assert that chaos is part of the cosmos, and what is more, God is involved in this chaos."⁸ That there is chaos does not mean God is not working. At times he uses the chaos to bring about his plan. From the details gathered in the Book of Job, Job was righteous, but he was also comfortable. He had lived an entirely blessed life up until the time when disaster struck. As iron is forged with fire, so are characters molded and spirits refined through adversity. Job himself recognized this in chapter 23 when he states that once God has tested him, he will be refined as gold.⁹ The refining itself is not the end goal, it is that the refining allows us to be in closer communion with God and to hold greater glory, a greater fullness of his presence. As exemplary as Job was before his trials, it was not until he was brought down to a point where he had nothing left that he held out his hand to the only one who could help.

⁸ Juliana M. Claassens, "A Dialogue of Voices: Job, Socrates and the Quest for Understanding," *Old Testament Essays* 19, no. 3 (2006): 1118.

⁹ Job 23:10. ESV. "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold."

Facing the Dragon

We are not given a lot of description about Job's personality and character prior to his trial other than he feared God and performed righteous actions. We do not know if he helped the poor and defended the widow from a true heart of compassion or if it was from a sense of obligation. We do not know if he truly saw the blessed life he lived as the gracious gift of God or if he saw it as his just reward that he deserved. Considering he only had three friends who came to comfort him and those seem to have come from a distance, it is likely the latter. We do not know the hidden faults that Job might have had, and he likely did not either because he had never been in a place where he had to face the dragon within himself. It was not until he was brought low and rendered powerless, when he was stripped of everything except for the essence of who he was that he called to God for deliverance.

Leviathan in the book of Job is a symbol and a sign to the reader that regardless of the fear you face or the spiritual battle you are engaged in, God is in the one in whom you are to put your trust, and he is the one who will triumph in the end. Leviathan, the dragon, is used throughout the Bible to inspire victorious hope, as John Day notes

Although the Hebrews did not borrow the theology of Canaan, they did borrow its imagery — here the imagery of Baal's enemy, Sea/Dragon/Leviathan. As the progress of Scripture unfolds, this Leviathan, now Yahweh's enemy, is used to portray (a) Yahweh's victory over the power of Chaos at Creation; (b) Yahweh's victory over the power

of Egypt at the Exodus and over the power of Babylon at the "exodus" from the Exile; and (c) ultimately, as Isaiah 27:1 illustrates, to portray Yahweh's victory over the power of Satan at the eschaton on the analogy that "as the beginning, so also the end."¹⁰

What is Your Dragon?

What is the mountain in your life you think you cannot be moved or the dragon you think cannot be slain? Whatever the problem, God is powerful and Lord over all. Just as in the end Job was restored to a greater abundance than he had before, when life is devastated by dragon fire, he brings beauty from the ashes.

Adapted from *A Walk Through the Book of Job* (2022)
upcoming from Plumb Line Press.

¹⁰ John N. Day, "God and Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 155 (Winter 1998): 436.

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