

**THE GOD OF ANIMALS, PART IX:  
WHAT SHOULDER TWISTS LEVIATHAN'S SINEWS?  
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH  
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—JOB 40:15-41:34  
WILLIAM A. EVERTSBERG**

I hope you remember Job's story from Sunday School. At the beginning of the book which bears his name, Job has everything. He has seven sons and three daughters for a nice round total of ten children. He has five hundred oxen and five hundred donkeys for a nice, symbolic total of one thousand. He has seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels for a symmetrical total of ten thousand. As Tom Long puts it, "Job not only has sons, daughters, and animals; he has them in symmetrical numbers."<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning Job has everything, but then loses it. Brush fires kill his sheep, cattle rustlers steal his oxen, a tornado destroys his house and kills all ten children, and then in a final indignity Job gets a nasty case of psoriasis which leaves him sitting on the ruins of his estate scratching his sores with the broken bricks of what used to be his house.

All of this happens in the first chapter. For the next 36 chapters, Job unleashes a scathing indictment of God's shoddy management of the universe. "If I am a good guy," he whines, "and if you are a good, not to mention an all-powerful, God, then why have I become the pitiful laughing stock and pathetic doormat of the known world?" For 35 chap-

ters Job prattles on and on while God fails to utter a single, solitary peep in God's own defense, until chapter 38, when, finally, to Job's utter dismay, God decides God's heard enough from this human pipsqueak and thunders forth a compelling self-defense in some of the finest poetry in the entire Bible and maybe the entire history of world literature.

"Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge?" thunders the Creator of All the Stars and Worlds. "Gird up your loins like a man, Job, and answer me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Where were you when I shut in the sea with doors? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain? Do you know where the vast storehouses of the snow are hidden? Who feeds the young ravens their breakfast? Did you clothe the horse with the strength that makes it laugh at fear? Have you ever seen an ostrich, Job? What inscrutable imagination concocted a silly bird that can't fly but races across the desert at forty miles an hour?"

The whole point of God's admittedly somewhat defensive diatribe is that the universe is a lot bigger than Job thinks and running it is a lot more complicated than Job wants to admit. God is trying to open Job's eyes to the wild, raucous, irrepressible multiplicity of creation, which seems to spasm out in all kinds of directions almost unanticipated even by the Creator who threw the whole show across the

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Long, "Job: Second Thoughts from the Land of Uz," *Theology Today*, April, 1988, p. 7.

cosmic stage in the first place. The universe seems to birth life and novelty and surprise and shapes and colors and forms and events that even God Godself could never have predicted, and the universe seems to behave in ways that even God Godself can barely govern.

And then before God is finished facing Job down across this rhetorical poker table God pulls out two of creation's most powerful trump cards, the Ace and King of Diamonds—God directs Job's attention to Behemoth and Leviathan.

“Behold, Behemoth,” boasts God, “which I made just as I made you. It eats grass like the ox but its bones are bronze and its limbs iron. It plays in the reeds and in the marshes and the river willows give it shade. It can swallow the Jordan without blinking. Can you snare its nose with hooks as if it were a lake trout?”

‘Behemoth’ is a Hebrew word which is simply the plural form of the word for ‘beasts,’ but this plural word is what is known as an ‘intensive plural,’ or a ‘plural of majesty.’ Have you ever come across that concept before? You use an intensive plural, or a plural of majesty, when the singular form of the word just isn't big enough to capture the size and awesomeness of something. You have to intensify your description of it by making it plural, by making it ‘many.’ Behemoth is such an impressive beast that you can't just call it ‘The Beast;’ you have to call it ‘The Beasts,’ and then you match that plural form with singular verbs. “‘The Beasts’ eats grass like the ox. ‘The Beasts’ has bones of bronze and limbs of iron. Can you snare ‘The Beasts’ with a hook?” An intensive plural suggests bigness, many-ness, awesomeness.

In the mythology of the ancient Near East, Behemoth was a monster symbolizing the dark, primordial, ungovernable forces still resident in God's otherwise good creation. Behemoth is a mythic or legendary creature, like the Abominable Snowman, maybe, or Bigfoot, something mysterious and frightening and unknown, but in fact Behemoth also has a common earthly incarnation. Can you guess what it is, something that plays at the river's edge and eats straw like an ox but has limbs of bronze and bones of iron? Behemoth is the hippopotamus.

When Job asks God why the universe seems so screwed up, God pulls out the hippopotamus as an answer. The universe is unpredictable, God seems to be saying to Job. Just see what pops up when you're not paying attention. If you had been present at the first day of creation and tried to predict what life forms and shapes and personalities evolution might scatter across the fecund globe, you would never have predicted the hippopotamus in a million years.

Don't laugh. The hippo is an herbivore. It eats grass like the ox, but do you know that in Africa they consider the hippopotamus to be the most dangerous animal on the continent, this in a land which also boasts lions, hyenas, rhino's, crocodiles and green mambas? Eleven feet long, five feet tall, and three thousand pounds, the hippo is the most aggressive animal in Africa and kills more people than any other.

The hippo is one of God's oddest accomplishments. It is, of course, an aquatic animal but it can't swim and isn't even all that buoyant, because, as the Bible helpfully points out, its limbs are like bronze and its bones iron. DNA research shows that its closest living relatives

are not rhinos or elephants or cattle, but whales and dolphins. The hippo is almost a cetacean. It sleeps underwater, rising to the surface for air every five minutes without waking up and then sinking back to the bottom again. It can run thirty miles an hour. Yes, if they let a hippo enter the Beijing Olympics, it would beat Tyson Gay, the fastest living human, and win the gold medal in the 100-meter dash. By the way, do you know the collective noun for a group of hippos? A group of hippos is called a 'bloat.' Is that perfect or what? I just love the English language.

Creation is unpredictable, says God to Job, pulling out the hippo as Exhibit 'A.' But God's not finished yet. There's an Exhibit 'B'. Exhibit 'B' is 'Leviathan.' "Can you snare Leviathan with a fish-hook?" God asks Job. "Who can penetrate its double coat of armor? Who can open the doors of its face? Will you put it on a leash to play with your children? It laughs at the sword, the spear, the arrow, and the javelin. Iron is like straw for Leviathan, and bronze it splits as easily as rotten wood."

Leviathan is a Hebrew word which means 'coil' or 'twist,' or 'serpentine,' and like Behemoth, Leviathan in the ancient Near East was a mythological monster symbolizing the dark primordial unpredictability of creation. Leviathan was a mythic or legendary beast, like the dragon, or like the Loch Ness Monster, but also like Behemoth, Leviathan has a common earthly incarnation. Aquinas and Melville thought Leviathan was the whale, but it sounds more like the crocodile, doesn't it? "Who can penetrate its double coat of armor, with scales knit up tightly together so nothing can get inside? Who can open the doors of its mouth? Will you put it on a leash and let your children play with it?"

Who can open the doors of its mouth? The crocodile has the most powerful jaws on earth, five times stronger than the hyena, twelve times stronger than a great white shark, fifteen times stronger than a rottweiler. The crocodile is 200 million years old, as old as the dinosaurs but far more resilient, somehow managing to survive several mass extinctions; it is ancient and alien, as if dropped here from some other strange, unknown galaxy.

The Presbyterian Church has a mission hospital in Zambia on the banks of the Zambesi River, and a few years ago I had the chance to help build a clinic and doctor's residence on the hospital grounds. At the end of the week I had a chance to take a whitewater rafting trip down the Zambesi which promised several world-class rapids, and I was so excited about it. You put in under the spray of Victoria Falls and ride the Zambesi's rapids down.

I was excited, that is, until the hour-long class they make you sit through before they put you on the raft. It turns out that they're not afraid you might drown. They give you a life-jacket to prevent that, and they give you a helmet so you won't bang your head against the rocks, but there's nothing they can do about the crocodiles and the hippos. As far as I could tell, the rafting class boiled down to this: "If you meet a crocodile or a hippo, you're on your own. We'll try to rescue you, but good luck with that! Even today, more people are killed in Zambia by hippos than by automobiles. I am happy to say that I had no close encounters with Behemoth or Leviathan, as you can plainly see.

Poet William Blake wondered where creation's odd and fierce beasts came from.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright,  
In the forests of the night,

What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

And what shoulder, and what art?  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand, and what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? What dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb, make thee?

Is it possible, Blake wanted to know, that the same creative force which fashioned the meek lamb also threw fire into the eye of the tiger? What eccentric imagination concocted Behemoth and Leviathan? What shoulder twisted Leviathan's steely sinews into its ancient, alien, crocodilian shape?

When Job asks God, "Why is creation such a dangerous place? Why is my existence so fragile? Why do bad things happen to good people?" God parades Behemoth and Leviathan past Job as if to say, "Job, look at the beauty and surprise and eccentricity of my world. Look at the drama. I step back to let creation be. I don't micro-manage my world. I let it grow and develop and evolve into shapes and forms and personalities and stories that even I could never have predicted. I didn't want a machine, Job. I wanted a drama. I didn't want security and predictability; I wanted a leaping, flying, diving zoo of unanticipated adventure. I wanted a snowstorm with ten billion snowflakes and not one like any other. I wanted a world with 4500 species

of sponges, 10,000 species mollusks, a million different insects, fish that fly and birds that don't and crabs that climb trees." Visit the Hall of Biodiversity at the American Museum of Natural History and listen to what God is trying to say to Job.

For all our sophisticated science, we still don't know whether it will rain tomorrow, or in five minutes. A while back the annual staff picnic of the National Weather Service in San Diego was rained out on an afternoon they had predicted would be clear and sunny. In San Diego. I didn't know it even rained in San Diego.

What it all means is that the universe is moderately reliable, fairly dangerous, and maximally interesting.

Behemoth and Leviathan are symbols of creation's oddness and unpredictability. Still, they will always belong to God, and they will never slip God's bonds. No sparrow falls to the earth unheeded, the hairs on your head are numbered, and all things work together for good to those who love God.

This world may not always be safe, but it is lovely, and it is God's. God steps back to let the creation be. God just lets it be, and grow, and change. God lets the creative process throw rampant, garish color across the meadow, God roils the oceans with gargantuan monsters diving down deep, God fires the infinite night with the flicker of flame no matter where you look, God colonize every muddy swamp with an improbable miscellany of living breathing stuff. As Job himself put it, "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."