

## THE SUFFERING OF JOB

### The Denouement

#### *God's Second Speech (40:6—41:34)*

The first divine speech was directed toward Job's penchant for wanting to know things about God that were unfathomable, and the litany of examples from the natural and animal worlds pointed out just how far short Job's understanding fell in a universe filled with unfathomable things and creatures. Now, in a second speech, God addresses Job's complaint that life was not fair and that God seemed unreachable. Job's final challenge had been his insistent plea that God would put an indictment against him in writing (cf. 31:35). He believed God had taken away his "right" to justice (cf. 27:2). Such a challenge implied, even if not directly, that God's justice and integrity were somehow suspect. God offers Job no such indictment, either oral or written, but more importantly, in this second speech he demonstrates that Job's attitude needs adjustment, particularly his insistence that he had some inherent "right" to be vindicated by God in the present life. Just as Job was completely unable to understand the incomprehensible features of the natural world, he was equally incapable of directing the incomprehensible features of the moral world. It is to this point that the second divine speech is addressed.

As in the first speech, Yahweh speaks out of the whirlwind, ordering Job to brace himself for additional interrogation (40:6-7; cf. 38:3). The first question directly confronts the issue of God's moral justice (40:8). Was Job so insistent on his innocence that he would impugn God? What follows is a challenge that underscores the truth that God's justice in the world is not merely a matter of legalities, as though for Job to be right, God must be wrong, or for God to be right he must immediately adjudicate all injustices in the world. Rather, Job must trust God to be just even though he could not understand what was happening to him. Hence, God invites Job to consider how he might govern the moral world if he had the opportunity (40:10-13). If, so to speak, Job could assume the robes of God and display his moral outrage by immediately taking down the proud and the wicked, reducing them to the dust of death, something he once complained was not happening (cf. 21:7-26; 24:1-25) but should happen (cf. 27:7-23), was he ready to take on such a responsibility? The point, of course, is that Job was quite unequal to the task, and consequently, he needed to rethink his mindset in this regard.



*Behemoth and Leviathan*

*Watercolor by William Blake*

God now challenges Job to consider two incomprehensible and awesome creatures, both prime examples of pride, which God had created and allowed to live. Was Job, wearing the garments of God as judge, able to bring them down? Did he have an “arm” like God or a “hand” like God that could bring to heel these two terrible and incredible creatures called Behemoth and Leviathan?

These two creatures, בְּהֵמוֹת (= *behemoth*) and לֵוִיָּאָן (= *leviathan*), merit special consideration. The English Versions simply transliterate their names from Hebrew, and these English words do not describe animals in the known world. Leviathan has been mentioned previously in Job 3:8, and both names are familiar from ancient Near Eastern literature outside the Bible, where they represent supernatural creatures. Behemoth eats grass (40:15), but he also is called “the first of the works of God” (40:19a), which is to say, the first created being. Leviathan seems to live in the water (41:1), but out of his nostrils come smoke and fire (41:19-21). In ancient Near Eastern literature, Leviathan is generally described as the sea monster with seven heads. In the Old Testament, the word *behemoth* can be used of beasts in general (12:7; Dt. 32:24; Ps. 8:7; 50:10, etc.), but *leviathan* usually has a connotation of the power of evil (cf. Ps. 74:13-14; Is. 27:1). It seems probable that the two beasts in the Apocalypse of John in the New Testament, the beast from the sea and the beast from the land, are drawn from this same imagery (Rv. 13:1, 11).

With respect to the Book of Job, then, the interpreter must decide whether these two creatures are: 1) borrowed from the mythology of the ancient Near East, or 2) are symbolic of the powers of evil but described in mythopoeic language, or 3) are simply huge animals described in hyperbolic language to be read poetically but not literally. Since about the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Behemoth has traditionally been identified with the hippopotamus, while Leviathan has been thought to be a crocodile (or sometimes a whale, so NEB). With the discovery of various ancient Near Eastern texts that describes these creatures as supernatural, however, many if not most scholars opt for a mythological interpretation. If they are taken ultimately to represent spiritual powers of the sort that many centuries later St. Paul would describe as the *stoicheia*, “rulers, authorities, powers and dominion” (Ep. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 2:8, 20), then the challenge to Job was whether or not he was capable of bringing into submission such astounding other-worldly creatures of consummate pride.

One thing is clear: these creatures, whatever they are, were created by God and live under the dominion of God (40:15, 19; 41:33; cf. Ps. 104:26; Col. 1:16). How much Job could have known about them if they refer to spiritual entities is unclear, but he certainly would have been aware of the broader perception in the ancient Near East that such monstrous creatures existed, and indeed, this viewpoint is shared by the biblical authors and those following them (*Leviathan*: Job 3:8; 41:1; Ps. 74:14; Is. 27:1; cf. 2 Esdras 6:49, 52; *Behemoth*: Job 40:15-24; cf. 1 Enoch 60:7-9; 4 Ezra 6:49-52).

### **Behemoth (40:15-24)**

While Behemoth is a being created just as Job was created (40:15), certain features suggest that it is other-worldly. The hippo was hardly the first created being (40:19a). To be sure, one must allow for poetic imagery and hyperbole, but that being said, even making such allowances does not eliminate the problem of identity. Whatever this creature, he is unlikely to be captured by putting a ring in his nose like an ox (40:24)!

Verse 40:19b has been a considerable challenge to translate and interpret with most English Versions opting for a literal rendering, “Let him who made him bring near his sword” (ESV, so also RV, KJV, RSV, JPS, NAB, NIB, NIV, NJB, NRSV). In other words, no one except the Creator was sufficiently superior and powerful to slay this fearsome creature, certainly not Job!

### **Leviathan (41)**

A much longer description is given for Leviathan, occupying the whole of chapter 41. The description of it as a fire-breathing dragon before whom “the gods” recoil does not sound like any known animal (41:18-21, 25).<sup>1</sup> The difficulty of capturing or killing such a terrifying creature is obvious (41:1-2, 7, 13b, 26-29). Just the sight of it is so intimidating that any hope of bringing it to heel vanishes (41:9). It would be sheer madness to attempt to try (41:10). When it is aroused, the “gods” recoil in terror (41:25). Its thrashing about leaves a sheen on the surface of the deep (41:31-32). It is unrivaled in fearlessness and pride (41:33-34).<sup>2</sup>

So, what is the point in this long and elaborate description of such a fearsome and exotic creature? The main thrust is that there is mystery in the Almighty’s creation that cannot be explained or unpacked by limited humans, and they must admit these limitations. By comparison, what is true in terms of God and the created world is equally true in terms of moral and ethical categories. Job must trust in the character of the sovereign God, whether or not he can fully understand why things happen as they do.

If the interpreter is willing to see in Leviathan the embodiment of a supernatural creature representing the chaotic powers of evil, and indeed, as a creature that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is in opposition to God and can be taken down by God (cf. Is. 27:1; Ps. 74:14; Rv. 12:10; 19:19-20; 20:10), then the description of Leviathan takes on a deeper significance. In this case, it affirms that God is in control of those “principalities and powers” that oppose him, even the invisible spiritual powers that intrude into the fractured world of humans. Only God can turn the power of evil upon itself, changing “ashes into beauty” (cf. Is. 61:3), and in the end, this reversal will come full circle for Job as well.

Does Leviathan represent the *satan* at the opening of the book? God does not say. Indeed, had he done so, much of the lesson for Job would have remained unlearned, for if the fundamental lesson was one of complete trust, then it was not one of complete comprehension. Still, in taking a tour of the created world, Job observed enough of God’s sovereignty and creative majesty to warrant his trust in the midst of the things he could not understand. Many centuries later, this same wisdom would be framed by St. Paul, who wrote: “But we know that to the ones who love God, he works all things for the good, to the ones called according to his purpose” (cf. Ro. 8:28). The point for St. Paul as well as for Job was not in **the things he knew**, but in **the One he knew**,

<sup>1</sup> The KJV “neesings” in 41:18 is archaic for sneezing. The verb תָּהַל אֹר (= “flashing light”) describes the vapor from the creature’s exhalations, and its eyes are depicted as כָּעֵצֵי עֵינַיִם שָׁחַר (= “like the eyelids of the dawn”), comparing its eyes with the red blaze of the rising sun (see 3:9). In 41:19, לִפְיֵיהֶם (= “torches”) stream from its mouth along with אֵשׁ כִּידֹדִים (= “sparks of fire”). In 41:20, smoke pours out like vapor from a boiling pot or [burning] reeds (most translators add words like “burning” due to context). His breath in 41:21 is גִּהְלֵי יָם תִּלְהֹט (= “blazing coals”) and לֶהָב (= “blade” or “flame”).

<sup>2</sup> Lit., “king over all the sons of pride”

and for Job, this would be sufficient.

### **Job's Final Response (42:1-6)**

The reader now comes to Job's final response to Yahweh. His tour of the unfathomable natural world, the unexplainable animal world, and finally, the two formidable creatures of the moral/spiritual world have expanded Job's horizons far beyond what he possibly could have imagined. He now understands all too clearly that as a limited, finite human, he could never measure up to the task of governing the universe.

It is in view of all this that Job confesses, "I know that you are able [to do] everything, and no purpose of yours can be restrained" (42:1-2). To Yahweh's penetrating question, "Who is this concealing counsel without knowledge?" (cf. 38:2), Job now responds, "Therefore I declared [what] I did not discern, [things] too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (42:3)! Job has been set free from the narrow confines of his former worldview. The *satan's* slanderous prediction that Job would curse God to his face (cf. 1:11; 2:5) has been proved false! Twice Yahweh had demanded that Job hear him and be prepared to answer (42:4; cf. 38:3; 40:7). Now, Job is willing to speak, for he realizes that his former knowledge of God was only comparable to a dim rumor, but now he has seen the Lord (42:5)! Job now retracts his former doubtful ruminations and bows in deep reverence (42:6). Job is not here confessing sin.<sup>3</sup> He is frankly and fully recognizing his limitations as a man of "dust and ashes" (an idiom for human mortality, cf. Ge. 18:27), while gratefully accepting the comfort brought to him by the voice and presence of God.

### **God's Rebuke of Job's Friends (42:7-9)**

Now God addresses Eliphaz, presumably the oldest of the trio of friends (cf. 15:10), but doubtless he intends the others as well (42:7). He bluntly assesses their contributions as failures. It was not, of course, that his friends did not say many things that were true, or for that matter, that everything Job said was correct. Rather, their conclusion that sin is immediately punished while righteousness is immediately rewarded—their cause-and-effect theology, which they then applied to Job's case—was absolutely wrong. By contrast, Job had spoken what was "right" about God, and whatever else this might mean, it must surely include his unwavering trust in a Redeemer who would someday "stand upon the earth," and by implication, right the wrongs of the world (cf. 19:25-27).

The deepest irony, of course, is that God now demanded of Job's friends that they suffer the ultimate ignominy, going to Job so that he might offer a sacrifice and intercessory prayer in their behalf for their folly (42:8)!

### **The Restoration (42:10-17)**

After his generous prayer, God turned about Job's ordeal, doubly restoring what he had lost in the invisible contest with the *satan* (42:10). That Yahweh is said to have brought upon Job this ordeal is only in keeping with the general viewpoint of the Hebrew Bible that all events derive either from God's direction or his permission, even those that come from the instigation of the *satan* (cf. 2 Sa. 24:1; 1 Chr. 21:1).

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<sup>3</sup> A more typical word for turning from sin would be **שׁוּב**, which is not used here.

## The Answers of Jesus to Job

**Job's penetrating questions are timeless, and though Job could not have known it, they would be answered in the incarnation of God's Son.**

- *Does God understand human suffering (6:2-3)?* Jesus was made like his human fellows in every respect; he suffered and was tested to the limit (He. 2:17-18).
- *Could humans be righteous before an infinitely holy God (9:2, 14-20)?* Since they have been justified by faith, they now have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ (Ro. 5:1). They are given the gift of righteousness (Ro. 5:15-17).
- *Is there a mediator who can fully relate to both God and human life (9:32-35)?* There is one mediator between God and humans, the man Jesus Christ (1 Ti. 2:5).
- *Does God somehow perversely enjoy human suffering (10:3-4)?* Certainly not! The person of faith may confidently cast all his/her cares upon Jesus, for he cares for them (1 Pe. 5:7).
- *If a man dies, will he live again (14:14)?* Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (Jn. 11:25).
- *Would God cover over human sin so that he might enjoy relationship with his creatures (14:16-17)?* Humans have been given the opportunity of true fellowship, for the blood of Jesus cleanses them from all sin (1 Jn. 1:7).
- *Will there be justice in the end (24:1)?* When Christ comes, he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Co. 4:5).
- *Why is God silent? Will he ever speak (23:3-9; 30:20)?* In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son (He. 1:2). He is able to sympathize with humans in their weakness, inviting them near to the throne of grace, where they will find mercy in their time of need (He. 4:15-16).