

Dragon Imagery in the Old Testament

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It is probably surprising to many readers how much monster imagery occurs in the Old Testament. Often washed out in contemporary English translations, images, allusions, and depictions of monsters are replete throughout the OT text. The Biblical writers were very familiar with the myths and beliefs of their own day (ancient Near East), and drew on them generously to illustrate such things as the sovereignty and power of God, the nature of evil and chaos in this world, and God's deliverance.

In this paper I will examine the Old Testament usage of one particular kind of monster from Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) mythology: the dragon. While it seems that virtually every culture has its own version of a dragon myth, I will specifically look at ancient Canaan and Mesopotamia, examining a key text from each, *The Baal Myth* and *Enuma Elish*. I will seek to show how the OT writers use dragon imagery drawn from this mythic framework as a foil to show the absolute sovereignty and salvific power of Yahweh over all other forces in this world.

Dragons in the *Baal Myth*

The *Baal Myth*¹ was discovered at the ancient port-city of Ugarit (now called Ras Shamra), located in present-day Syria, and was a major Canaanite city-state during the second millennium B.C.² Excavations of Ras Shamra began after 1928 when a Syrian plowman accidentally opened a tomb. Since then thousands of texts have been discovered. Included among these are the six tablets upon which the *Baal Myth* was recorded. These were found in the library of Baal's chief priest in the main temple complex, recorded by a scribe who identifies himself as Ilimilku in the final colophon of the text.³ The tablets were apparently subsidized by Niqmaddu II, King of Ugarit, dating them c.1375-1345 BC. Despite the date of the tablets, it is assumed the myth is centuries older.⁴

The *Baal Myth* is the account of the god Baal, and his ascendancy among the pantheon. While the tablets are corrupt at certain key points in the storyline, and though there is some debate as to the order in which the account should flow, the basic storyline is as follows. El is chief among the gods. Kotar-wa-Hasis, craftsmen of the gods, goes to El, where he is instructed to build a palace for Yam ("Sea"; also called Naharu, "River"). Textual corruptions interrupt the story, but it seems that Yam is being threatened by Kotar-wa-Hasis, either personally or as a representative of another. Yam sends a delegation to El, demanding the surrender of Baal so that Yam might take possession of his gold. The delegation arrives while Baal is feasting with El. The gods are afraid of the mighty Yam, but Baal rebukes them. El is about to acquiesce to Yam's demand, but Baal becomes enraged, and must be restrained by Anat and Astarte from attacking the envoy. At

¹ The *Baal Myth* is also called the *Baal Epic*, *Baal Cycle*, or simply *Baal*, depending on the translation one is using. By *Baal Myth*, I am referring to the specific text found on 6 tablets near the temple complex at Ugarit, recorded by Ilimilku, disciple of Attanu-Puraulini, chief priest of Baal.

² Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1978), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

this point the tablet breaks off. What appears to follow is some form of divine council, but as Day notes, “it is so fragmentary that nothing at all can be deduced from it.”⁵ For our purposes, what is important is the escalating conflict between Yam and Baal.

The story picks up again on tablet 2, column 4 where Kotar-wa-Hasis arms Baal with two maces. Baal strikes down Yam, killing him, after which he dismembers him and scatters his remains. Yam is defeated and Baal is supreme. Baal proceeds with a feast and the construction of his palace. The *Baal Myth* ends with a battle against Mot (Death). Baal is struck down and the earth withers in drought in the absence of Baal’s rain. At the end Baal returns to life and Mot capitulates in an uneasy armistice.

Clearly the main antagonists of the *Baal Myth* are Yam and Mot, with El portrayed as a weak, politically-motivated figurehead who allies himself with whichever god exercises the most strength at the time. What is interesting however, is the mention of dragons as some type of unexplained, additional antagonist in the account.

There are four instances where explicit dragon references are made. The first is in tablet 3, column 3, lines 32-51. The context of this passage is difficult. Baal has just defeated Yam and is celebrating. For reasons unknown, Anat engages in a slaughter of the people of earth, after which Baal sends an emissary to summon Anat to himself at Mt. Zaphon. When Baal’s messengers arrive, Anat shakes in fear. Why she is afraid is unclear, but her response is to boast of her exploits and take credit for the defeat of Yam. Anat states—

I have smitten Ilu’s [El’s] beloved, Yammu,
have finished off the great god Naharu.
I have bound the dragon’s jaws, have destroyed it,
have smitten the twisting serpent,
the close-coiled one with seven heads.⁶

Followed by—

I have smitten Ilu’s [El’s] beloved Arisu (Demander),
have wreaked destruction on Ilu’s calf Atiku (Binder).
I have smitten Ilu’s bitch Isatu (Fire),
have finished off Ilu’s daughter Dabibu (Flame).

The word translated “dragon” is *tnn*, vocalized *tannin*.⁷ Mention of this *tannin* is perplexing. It has not occurred in the story so far, is not integral to the plotline, and is without context. The interpretive question is to whom this “dragon” is referring.

That the binding and destroying of the dragon is mentioned immediately after the stanza describing the destruction of Yam has led some to suggest this is a synonymous parallel equating

⁵ John Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8.

⁶ Translations are taken from Dennis Pardee and follow his reconstruction in “The Balu Myth,” Pages 241-274 in *The Context of Scripture Vol. 1*, (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁷ Pardee, “The Balu Myth,” 252, n.92.

Yam and the dragon. This is furthered by the fact that the dragon is mentioned as being “in the sea” at the end of the epic on tablet 6, column 6, line 50. It is a final song of praise to the sun-god Sapsu, in which it states—

In your entourage are the gods,
even the (divinized) dead.
In your entourage is Kotaru your companion,
and Hasisu whom you know well.
In the sea are Arisu (Demander) and the dragon;
may Kotaru-wa-Hasisu drive (them) out!
may Kotaru-wa-Hasisu drive (them) away!

Since Yam is the god of the sea, the correlation makes sense.

The difficulty is that Yam is never actually called a *tannin*. Yam is never described with dragon or serpent terminology, nor are these creatures ever even described as allies of Yam. At most one sees that both are referenced with the sea, but that is hardly enough to posit mutual identity.

Furthermore, what some see as a synonymous parallel can just as easily be a reference to another creature. Besides Yam, Anat boasts of her defeat of El’s other “beloved” beings, including Arisu (Demander), Ilu’s calf Atiku (Binder), Ilu’s bitch Isatu (Fire), and Ilu’s daughter Dabibu (Flame). The identity and significance of these creatures are also widely unknown, but no one suggests that they are to be equated with Yam. Yes, Arisu (the Demander) is associated with the sea and the *tnn* at the end of tablet 6, but this does not explain the rest of the creatures. It seems instead that Anat is simply giving a list of the many creatures she has defeated. If anything, association between Arisu and *tnn* seems more likely than *tnn* and Yam. As Pardee states, “If *tnn* is not a sub-set of the water deities, one wonders if it is possible to identify him with another known deity.”⁸

A further difficulty in identifying *tnn* as Yam occurs in tablet 5, where a near-exact repetition of this stanza occurs, but this time from the mouth of Mot. He states—

When you smite Lotan, the fleeing serpent,
finish off the twisting serpent,
the close-coiling one with seven heads,
The heavens wither and go slack
like the folds (?) of your tunic.
(Then) I, with groans, am devoured,
(like) a piece of dung I die.
(So) you must (for your part) descend into the throat of Motu, son on Ilu,
into the watery depths of the beloved warrior of Ilu.

The stanza is repeated twice, and the serpent imagery is remarkably similar to Anat’s earlier statement, so much so that it feels like a fixed verse or liturgical form. This time, the “twisting serpent, the close-coiling one with seven heads” is called “Lotan” instead of *tannin*. Stemming

⁸ Pardee, “The Balu Myth,” 252, n.92.

from the root *ltn*, “Lotan” is the traditionally vocalized pronunciation, which most today agree should be pronounced “Litan.” Nearly everyone agrees that *tannin* and Lotan refer to the same creature, given that the same fixed description is given to each.

The significance is that in this instance, the creature is associated with Mot. When Lotan dies, Mot dies. Why, we are not sure. But the close association has led Williams-Forte to propose that *tnn* was Mot, the god of death.⁹

A similar reference occurs in a highly disputed and corrupted part of tablet 4, column 8, lines 48ff. Mot replies to the invitation by Baal to his victory feast by saying—

My throat is the throat of the lion in the wasteland,
and the gullet of the ‘snorter’ in the sea;

The identity of this “snorter of the sea” is unknown. Some have suggested a whale or other sea creature,¹⁰ but it is also reasonable to see dragon imagery in “the snorter of the sea,” especially given that *tannin* and the sea have already been equated. The more pertinent question is whether this lends credence to understanding this “snorter” as Mot.

The imagery carries on into the next few lines where Mot adds—

And indeed, indeed,
my throat consumes heaps (of things),
yes indeed, I eat by double handfuls;
And my seven portions are in a bowl.

Do these seven portions correspond to the seven heads of Lotan? If so, it would seem Mot refers to himself as the one with seven heads, and thus with portions in seven bowls to feed his seven mouths.

But like Yam, similar difficulties arise. Though Mot closely associates Lotan with himself, the stanza may be a reference to a separate creature instead of a synonymous parallel. Also like Yam, Mot is never actually called a *tannin* or Lotan outside of these passages, nor is Mot ever described with dragon or serpent terminology. Associations with the sea cannot be pushed too far in this instance either. Mot also associates himself with the sea when he tells Baal: “(So) you must (for your part) descend into the throat of Motu, son on Ilu, into the watery depths of the beloved warrior of Ilu” (see above). Yet Mot and Yam are clearly separate gods in the myth!

All of this begs the question: If the dragon is Yam, then how can he be Mot? And if he is Mot, how can he be Yam? The crux of this difficulty shows that it is the wrong question. *Tannin* is neither. What is more likely is that while Lotan and *tannin* refer to the same mythical creature, this mythical creature is separate in identity from both Yam and Mot. Pardee sets forth as the most logical explanation that “this cause-and-effect sequence is to see Lotan and his reptilian

⁹ Pardee, “The Balu Myth,” 252, n.92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 264, n.34.

allies as the kinsmen of Mot... If Balu attacks them, Motu must, as their kinsmen, take up their cause.”¹¹

The identity of Lotan the *tannin*, while interesting, is of secondary importance and risks distracting us from what is truly significant. What is of primary significance is that this dragon is *associated* with Yam and Mot. The question is not whether Lotan is Death or Sea, but rather that he is associated with both death and the sea.

Lotan the *tannin* is a great and terrible creature on equal par with the gods. He is mentioned in the same breath with the mighty gods Yam and Mot. Yam and Mot use his attributes in reference to themselves. Anat claims credit for his defeat and puts it on par with the defeat of Yam and El’s beloved creatures. She does it in order to elicit respect in the heart of Baal. Lotan the *tannin* is feared and he is a supreme adversary. He is great and mighty with unspeakable power before whom even gods tremble. This motif has profound implications for understanding dragon references in the OT.

Tiamat and *Enuma Elish*

Tiamat is the proper name for a monster that appears as the main antagonist in the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*. She appears with her consort Apsu as one of a pair of primordial deities, representing the sea water from which her name derives (*tiamtu*). There is little evidence that Tiamat’s name appears outside the *Enuma Elish*, and according to Lowell Handy, such references may be related to this myth¹²

Though disputed in recent years,¹³ it has been posited that the תהוֹ וְבִהוּ (‘‘chaos,’’ or ‘‘formless and void’’) referred to in Gen 1:2 derives its name from Tiamat. More likely is that Tiamat and תהוֹ share a common Semitic root.¹⁴ Further links between Gen 1:7 and *Enuma Elish* have been suggested on the basis that after Marduk (Ashur in the Assyrian version) slays Tiamat, he creates from her carcass the dome of the sky. That תהוֹם keeps a ‘‘quasi-personal’’ nature on occasion is seen in Gen 49:25 and Deut 33:13 where the deep is personified and crouches like an animal, but overall John Day sees the Genesis 1 references as intentional demythologizations of the ANE dragon myths for the purpose of simply demonstrating God’s control of the waters.¹⁵

In *Enuma Elish*, Tiamat is the mother of all the divine world. However, she was hesitant to engage in their creation. Tiamat is used in *Enuma Elish* to explain both the origins of creation, but also the opposition to further creation. Thus she embodies both chaos and the source of life.¹⁶

¹¹ Pardee, ‘‘The Balu Myth,’’ 264, n.201.

¹² Lowell Handy, ‘‘Tiamat,’’ *ABD* VI:546.

¹³ See Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 50-51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁶ H.G. May, ‘‘Some Cosmic Connotations of *Mayim Rabbim*, Many Waters, *JBL* 74:9-21, 1955.

Like the *Baal Myth*, *Enuma Elish* is primarily concerned with describing the ascendancy of the weather god (in this case, Marduk). Still, it gives explains the creation of the gods and humanity. Tablet 1 begins—

When skies were not yet named
Nor earth below pronounced by name,
Apsu, the first one, their begetter,
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together,
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;

....
Then gods were born within them.¹⁷

First, we see that Tiamat existed from the beginning, and together with her consort, Apsu, as responsible for the creation of the gods. Second, Tiamat is identified with the sea, specifically salt-water, while Apsu is identified with fresh water. Reference to them mixing their waters together describes a time before land or even marsh, when all that existed was a watery chaos. Similarities with the Spirit of God hovering over the “waters” before creation in Gen 1:2 can be seen.

The story progresses as the progeny of Apsu and Tiamat continue to reproduce gods of their own. The younger generations of god are loud and frivolous, disturbing the rest of Apsu and Tiamat. Without Tiamat’s consent, Apsu determines to destroy the next generation of gods so as to regain some semblance of peace. Apsu though is struck down, and Marduk is born out of his carcass. Like the younger gods, Marduk too plays loudly and boisterously. Near the middle of tablet 1, it states—

He fashioned dust and made the whirlwind carry it;
He made the flood-wave and stirred up Tiamat.
Tiamat was stirred up, and heaved restlessly day and night.

Note should be made between Tiamat and the raging sea. The result of Marduk’s wind results in the sea becoming stormy and chaotic. Tiamat is agitated; the sea is wrestles.

The gods, unable to rest, appeal to Tiamat to avenge Apsu. Joining forces with her, they convince to her such an action. Tablet 1 states—

They convened a council and created conflict.
Mother Hubur,¹⁸ who fashions all things,
Contributed an unfaceable weapon: she bore giant snakes,
Sharp of tooth and unsparing of fang.
She filled their bodies with venom instead of blood.

¹⁷ Translation taken from Stephanie Dalley, “The Epic of Creation,” pages 228-277 in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ A reference to Tiamat. Dalley suggests it is a possible pun: *hubur*, river / *huburu*, hubbub. *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 274, n.9.

She cloaked ferocious dragons with fearsome rays
And made them bear mantles of radiance, made them godlike,
Whoever looks upon them shall collapse in utter terror!
Their bodies shall rear up continually and never turn away!
She stationed a horned serpent, a *mushussu*-dragon...
Her orders were so powerful, they could not be disobeyed.
In addition she created eleven more likewise.

The story proceeds by showing that all the gods quake in fear of Tiamat. Only Marduk dares rise against her. The gods agree to make him their king if he can defeat Tiamat, and in an epic battle similar to Baal's defeat of Yam, he slays her, dividing her carcass into two, setting half as the sky, and the other half as the sea.

Scholarship has wrestled over questions of dependency. Before the discoveries at Ugarit, it was common to see Tiamat and *Enuma Elish* as the backdrop for OT dragon motifs. Most used to believe that dragon imagery in the OT had a Babylonian background, but with discovery of the Ugarit text's it has become apparent that links to Canaan pre-date Babylonian origin.¹⁹

However, one should not approach the myths with questions of dependency. It is better to think of the *Baal Myth* and *Enuma Elish* as sharing a common mythic heritage, each developing its own story in its own way among its own people. Even though textual evidence for dragons appear as early as Ugarit, these probably extend from sources and traditions much earlier than that.²⁰

Evidence for a common mythic background is seen in the widespread iconographic representations of dragons throughout the ANE. Old Syrian seals dating from the 18th-16th century BC show a Haddad/Baal killing a serpent, often in front of a goddess. Uehlinger argues that the appearance of these is so numerous, it must be in reference (or even proto-typical) of the Ugaritic conflict between Baal and Yam.²¹ One Assyrian cylinder seal shows a dragon with a body of waves being attacked by a warrior with two helpers.²² A Hittite cylinder seal shows two gods fighting a dragon pictured as waves curling over.²³ Oppenheim talks of the importance of the battle between Marduk and the dragon Tiamat in Assyrian iconography, as evidenced by cylinder seals and also the bronze relief from the gate of the New Year's chapel in Assur, which is expressly said to represent it.²⁴ Assimilation of Egyptian concepts and the dragon motif also seemed to occur as early as the Hyksos period. Scarab seals show Horus (the falcon-headed god), who was identified in Middle Bronze Age Palestine with the Syrian weather god Haddad/Baal, defeating a crocodile. Uehlinger sees this as the "Egyptizing version of the combat between the weather-god and the Sea" and as precedent for associating the dragon with the crocodile (cf. Ezek 29:3, 32:5).²⁵ He goes on say that later scarabs of the Late Bronze and

¹⁹ John Day, "Dragon and Sea, God's Conflict With," *ABD* II:228.

²⁰ Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 10.

²¹ C. Uehlinger, "Leviathan," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 958.

²² K. Spronk, "Rahab," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 1293.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1293.

²⁴ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, revised edition by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 264.

²⁵ Uehlinger, "Leviathan," 959.

Early Iron Age show Baal, now identified with Seth, fighting a horned serpent with a lance. “In Egyptian iconography, the crocodile appears as an enemy of the sun-god, and is subdued by the god Horus or the Pharaoh; early Iron age stamp seals from Palestine show a “master of crocodiles” holding two of these beasts under his control.”²⁶

Like the *Baal Myth*, *Enuma Elish* gives the picture of a primordial dragon associated with chaos and the sea. She is venerable, powerful, and nearly invulnerable. The gods fear her and destruction flows from her. Important for understanding OT dragon motifs are 1) Tiamat’s association with the primeval sea, 2) Tiamat’s origins from the beginning and association with chaos, 3) Tiamat’s terrible power and uncontrollable rage, 4) Tiamat’s supremacy over the gods, but also her defeat by Marduk, and 5) Tiamat’s association with dragons and the description given to them.

Dragon Terminology in the OT

Both the *Baal Myth* and *Enuma Elish* share a picture of the mythic backdrop from which the OT draws its dragon imagery. The word “dragon” is a transliteration of the Latin *draco*, derived from the Greek δράκων. Besides clear references to sea monsters, the LXX also uses δράκων to translate what appear in modern English translations as different types of snakes—פִתְיוֹן (Job 20:16) and נָחָשׁ (Amos 9:3, Job 26:13)—but also other creatures like עֲתוּד (Jer 50:8) and כַּפִּיר (Job 4:8 [4:10 LXX], 38:39).²⁷

English translations seek to reserve the term “dragon” for the mythical beast we associate with the term today. At times “Dragon” appears as a proper noun, referring to a specific creature (Job 7:12). Other times it appears as a common noun, referring to a type of creature (Gen 1:21). On occasion, it appears as part of a personal name or the name of a place (Neh 2:13).²⁸ Discounting links between תַּהֲוִי and Tiamat, three names appear for dragons in the OT—Tannin (for the Hebrew word תַּנִּינִי), Rahab, and Leviathan—the latter two being transliterations of the Hebrew words.

What follows is an examination of these terms and their usage in OT texts.

Tannin

Tannin, or in its Hebrew form, תַּנִּינִי, is the general and most common term in the OT for what we call “dragon.” Unlike Leviathan or Rahab, which are translated in the OT as proper names, *tannin* can appear both as a proper noun and as a general designation for a type of creature. *Tannin*, Leviathan, and Rahab at times are synonymous terms for the same creature. At other times Leviathan and Rahab should be understood as specific names for creatures belonging to the species *tannin*.

²⁶ Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” 962.

²⁷ J.W. Van Henten, “Dragon,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 505. Connections between the snake and the dragon have been seen in ANE literature and iconography already. It is not hard to see how a reference would be applied, or how the snake could be metaphorical for a dragon. The latter two terms are often translated today as “he-goats” and “young lions,” but an examination of each of these passages shows that the mythological language is so big, identification of these creatures as some dragon-like creature is just as feasible.

²⁸ G.C. Heider, “Tannin,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 1581.

Etymology for the term *tannin* is uncertain. Several possibilities have been suggested, including to “lament” (as in “howl”), “to stretch oneself,” and “to (ascend as) smoke.” The former shows a stronger link with *tn* (jackal), while the later can serve as a description of the creatures form (a long and stretched out body like swirling smoke, or possibly in reference to the idea of its ability to breathe fire, cf. Job 41:19-20).²⁹

Dragon terminology is much more frequent in the OT than the average English reader would suspect. One reason is that the Hebrew word תַּנִּין often appears in English translations as “sea creature,” “monster,” “serpent,” or “jackal.” A quick perusal of various English translations based on the lemma תַּנִּין demonstrates this.

In Gen 1:21, we see God creates תַּנִּין on the fifth day. The verse begins, אֶת־הַתַּנִּינִים הַגְּדֹלִים וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים (And God created the great *tannin*). The NRSV, which overall tends to translate *tannin* more faithfully as “dragon” than other English versions, translates it here as “great sea monsters.”³⁰ The ESV and NIV translate it as “great sea creatures,” thus removing any mythic elements, and the KJV goes so far as to translate it “great whales!”

Furthermore, English translations are often inconsistent in how they translate the word. In Job 7:12, Job questions God by saying, הֲיָם־אֲנִי אִם־תַּנִּין כִּי־תִשָּׂמַר עָלַי מוֹשְׁמֵר (Am I the sea, or a *tannin*, that you set a watch/guard over me?) In this instance, *tannin* appears in the singular; the NRSV and *Tanakh* choose to translate it as a proper noun, “The Dragon” (no definite article is present). This time the ESV, RSV, and NASB translate it “sea monster,” the NIV and NAB, “monster.”

An additional translational difficulty is that תַּנִּין is closely related to תַּן, the Hebrew word for “jackal.” This becomes especially confusing in plural forms. One would expect the plural of תַּן to be תַּנִּיִּם, and the plural of תַּנִּין to be תַּנִּינִים. However it appears that on occasion תַּנִּין is also shortened in the plural to תַּנִּיִּם, leaving the translator with the difficult task of determining whether the reference is to dragons or jackals. Holliday’s *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* lists this as a viable plural alternative,³¹ but this may reflect actual usage rather than grammatical correctness as several other lexicons label this usage as erroneous.³²

Added to this is the difficulty of the scope and usage of each word. Descriptions of flora and fauna are often difficult to pinpoint in Biblical Hebrew. Exact species are determined by a combination of etymology, context, poetic parallels, and available descriptions. Under the entry “Jackal,” the *New Theological Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* states,

This word is rarely attested outside the OT. In the OT it appears 14x, always in pl., and often in the utterance of the Lord’s judgment. Since these and other animals living in an

²⁹ See Heider, “Tannin,” 1579-1581.

³⁰ The JPS English translation of the *Tanakh*, along with the RSV, NASB, and NAB follow suit.

³¹ תַּנִּין, *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol 4.

³² *Whitakers Revised BDB Lexicon*, 1072.

uninhabited place like the desert... are referred to in the description of the wrath of God... they may symbolize the wrath of God.³³

The same exact connotation could be made for Biblical references to the dragon! While the *tannin* is often associated with the sea, context is not always clear as to the location of the animal, and it can be argued that this association with the sea is not required of *tannin*.

Isa 13:22 is one such example. In an oracle against Babylon, Isaiah predicts that Babylon will be overthrown by God, never to be inhabited as a desolate wasteland. In describing her ruin, Isaiah says: *וְעָנָה אַיִים בְּאַלְמִנּוּתָיו וְתָנִים בְּהִיכְלֵי עֲנָנָה* (Jackals will cry in its towers and *tannin* in luxurious palaces.) Desert references and mention of other desert animals could lead one to identify *tannin* in this context as “jackals.” However, 13:21 ends by saying *וְשַׁעֲרֵיהֶם* will be there dancing about. Translational choices of *וְשַׁעֲרֵיהֶם* are zoological (male goats) or mythological (satyrs). English translations are divided,³⁴ but noteworthy is the LXX choice of *δαίμόνια* for this term. If one is to see this as referring to a demonic or mythological beast, translating *tannin* in Isa 13:22 as “dragon” becomes far more plausible. Contextually, either would fit as both are beasts standing in negative opposition to God and representative of his absence.

A final translation found for *tannin* is “serpent.” Holliday’s *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* defines *tannin* as “sea monster” and “sea-dragon,” but also “serpent,” for which he cites Exod 7:9-12, Deut 32:33, and Ps 91:13 as its only three examples. Maarten Paul takes a similar approach, giving “sea creature” as his general definition, but stating that in these three passages a much smaller kind of serpent similar to the adder might be in mind.³⁵ An examination of these three passages show this while this translational option might be possible, it is far from absolute.

Exod 7:9-12 discusses the initial showdown at Pharaoh’s court between Moses and the magicians of Pharaoh. Aaron throws down his staff, which becomes a *tannin*. The sorcerers of Egypt respond in kind, also throwing down their staffs which become *tanninim* according to their secret arts. Aaron’s *tannin* swallows the Egyptians *tanninim*. That we are clearly dealing with the miraculous and supernatural is clear from a plain reading of the text. If Holliday’s semantic domain is correct, the staffs could have certainly turned into snakes. However this is not demanded by the context, as the staffs could have just as easily turned into dragons. In either case, the correlation between the two creatures, probably in terms of physical attributes, popular fear, and association with ancient myths of the serpent should be noted.

Deut 32:33 and Ps 91:13 offer little clarification. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses is reciting a song just before his death in which he tells the Israelites what will befall them for their future rebellion against God. In describing their condition, he says *חַמַּת תַּנִּינִים יַיִנָם וְרֹאשׁ פְּתָנִים אֶכְזָר* (Their wine is the rage/venom of *tannin* and the cruel head of venomous snakes). The translation of *tannin* as serpent is understandable, given the possible synonymous poetic parallel. Yet it can

³³ N. Kiuchi, “תַּן,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:310.

³⁴ ESV and NIV choosing “goats,” with KJV, NAB, RSV, and TNK choosing “satyrs.” NRSV goes with “goat-demons.”

³⁵ Maarten Paul, “תַּנִּין,” *NITDOTTE*, 4:310.

also be a reference to another creature, possibly a “sea monster,” providing a foil to the venomous snakes as a “sea” equivalent. Context provides little clarification. Snakes are mentioned throughout the song, but so are demons.

The same holds true in Ps 91:13, which reads: עַל־שָׁחַל וְפָתַן תְּדַרְךָ תִּרְכֹּם כְּפִיר וְתַנִּין (Upon a lion and venomous snake you will walk.³⁶ You will trample a young lion and *tannin*). Unlike Deut 32:33, this psalm speaks of the protection of YHWH, both personally and through his angelic forces, even in the midst of the greatest danger and evil. The question is whether the protection of YHWH in the midst of great evil is better understood through the metaphor of trampling a “serpent,” or as trampling a “dragon.” Both show God’s power and protection, but this is an instance where the two terms “serpent” and “dragon” should be seen as synonymous descriptions of the same creature, “serpent” being understood as a metaphorical description an ancient foe and powerful beast. This protection of YHWH extends beyond the simple trampling of a dangerous creature. Instead it is a reference to God’s sovereignty over the serpents and dragons of myths, whether Genesis 3 or dragon motifs taken from the ANE. Given later parallels of this passage in Jesus’ temptation by Satan, the conflation of dragon and serpent imagery becomes all the more potent!

In determining the possibility of *tannin* as serpent, one must note that Holliday’s work is based upon that of Koehler and Baumgartner, who in their *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* remove the reference to “serpent” and define it only as “sea monster,” “sea-dragon,” or “dragon.” They state: “The meaning... is always sea-monster, dragon, and not as in BibHeb., serpent.”³⁷

A perusal of OT *tannin* texts show that the general definition “dragon” not only fits as a reasonable definition, in many cases it is even preferable. My suspicion is that many English translations avoid this definition either out of a fear of appearing superstitious, a sense of embarrassment among modern-day scientifically-minded readers who might view the Bible as fairy-tale like, or resistance to the idea that Bible borrows and interacts with the ancient myths of its day.

Rahab

“Rahab” is the proper name given to the mythological sea dragon or chaos monster. Rahab consistently appears in English versions of the Bible as a proper name, transliterated from the Hebrew רַהַב. Occurring only six times in the OT,³⁸ this name has not yet been discovered outside the Biblical text. Scholars agree that ANE cognates are “sketchy at best,” possibly related to the Akkadian *ra’abu* (“tremble with rage”)³⁹ and its derivative *rubu*, “overflow.” Both functions are true of rage and water.⁴⁰ Spronk argues that the Hebrew name is probably related

³⁶ Interestingly, the LXX translates this phrase ἐπὶ ἀσπίδα καὶ βασιλίσκον ἐπιβήσῃ (Upon asps and *basilisks* you will walk). Is it better to translate βασιλίσκον as a diminutive of βασιλεύς, “petty king,” or simply as “basilisk,” referring to the mythical monster?

³⁷ תַּנִּין *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Vol 4.*

³⁸ Job 9:13, 26:12; Ps 87:4, 89:11; Isa 30:7, 51:9.

³⁹ Joseph R. Cathey, “Rahab,” *New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 728.

⁴⁰ Spronk, “Rahab,” 1292.

to *rhb*, “assail” or “press,”⁴¹ while John Day claims its literal meaning as “boisterous one.” Day further argues that Rahab functions similarly to the Leviathan in the OT and Ugarit, but whether these two creatures are identical or separate monsters is not clear.⁴²

Rahab appears in two different contexts—

- 1) A sea monster defeated at creation (Ps 89:11; Job 9:13, 26:12), and
- 2) A metaphor for Egypt (Ps 87:4; Isa 30:7). Isa 51:9 may be a fusion of these two motifs.

Psalm 89 sings off the great *hesed* love and faithfulness of Yahweh. Most of the psalm is spent recounting his power and grandeur. Ps 89:8-10 [Heb. 89:9-11] states in the NIV—

O LORD God Almighty, who is like you?
You are mighty, O LORD, and your faithfulness surrounds you.
You rule over the surging sea;
when its waves mount up, you still them.
You crushed Rahab like one of the slain;
with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.

The Psalmist seeks to demonstrate that none is like Yahweh. His power and might surpasses all. As an example of this, the psalmist shows how it is Yahweh who rules over the sea and has the power to tame it. Furthering this thought is the declaration that Yahweh has crushed Rahab.

The sea plays predominantly in the *Chaoskampf* motif, personifying the chaos and evil which God brings under his control and into order. Beginning with the primeval waters of the deep mentioned before creation in Gen 1:2 and paralleled in *Enuma Elish*, the sea was feared in the Ancient Near East. Dangerous and unpredictable, it was personified through a variety of mythical sea monsters, including Tiamat, Leviathan, and here, Rahab. God’s authority over the sea and his ability to slay Rahab demonstrates his sovereignty, not only over the forces of chaos and evil in this world, but also over the other pantheons, many of whom quivered in fear before the great sea monsters (see *Baal Myth* and *Enuma Elish*). If allusion to such myths is in fact occurring, texts such as these also show that Yahweh is certainly just as great as Baal or Marduk, and more likely intending to show that he is superior in that it was Yahweh, and not Baal or Marduk, who defeated the ancient sea monster.

Themes in Job are similar. Job 9:13-14 state: “God does not restrain his anger; even the cohorts of Rahab covered at his feet.” And Job 26:12-13:

By his power he churned up the sea;
by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces.
By his breath the skies became fair;
his hand pierced the gliding serpent.

Throughout Job the absolute authority and sovereignty of God are portrayed. Both verses come in a hymn of praise extolling God as creator and as controller of his creation. Like the preceding

⁴¹ Ibid., 1292.

⁴² Day, “Rahab,” *ABD* V:610.

text, mention of Rahab comes near the end of the stanza. Interesting in this instance is the mention of Rahab's "cohorts." John Day states that *Enuma Elish* tablet IV, line 107 is often quoted as a parallel, where the gods referred to as Tiamat's allies are called "her helpers."⁴³ One also remembers the eleven dragons Tiamat formed to help her overthrow the revolution of the gods. Not only so, if one sees the dragon in the *Baal Myth* as a separate creature than Leviathan, allusion to this myth might also be in mind. The dragons mentioned parallel to Leviathan in Ps 74:13-14 and the "enemies" referred to alongside Rahab in Ps 89:10 [Heb. 89:11] also comes to mind. Some have even suggested parallel to Behemoth, who appears as a separate mythical creature in close proximity to Leviathan in Job 40.⁴⁴

This image of Rahab is used three times as a symbol for the nations hostile to God. Isa 30:7 warns Israel about becoming enamored with the perceived power of Egypt as an ally, stating: "Egypt's help is worthless and empty; therefore I have called her "Rahab who sits still." (ESV). Israel might perceive in her power like that of Rahab, but God has defeated Rahab just as he has defeated Egypt. Both are broken and powerless. Similar usage is seen in Ezek 29:3-5 and 32:2-8 where pharaoh is called a *tannin*.

Psalms 87 sings of God's preeminent love for Zion. "I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'" Day points out that Rahab most likely refers to Egypt, given similar usage in Isa 30:7 and 51:9, and notes that it is debated whether this refers to proselytes or to an eschatological vision similar to Isaiah 2.⁴⁵ The power of Egypt is referred to as Rahab, possibly because of the way Yahweh defeated Egypt at the Exodus through his control of the Red Sea.

The final OT reference to Rahab is Isa 51:9, which fuses the creation and Egypt motifs.

Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through? ¹⁰ Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over? ¹¹ The ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. ¹² I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, ¹³ that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor? (NIV)

Israel is called to comfort and courage in exile. Why? Because God was victorious over the monster of chaos at creation, just as God was victorious in bringing his oppressed people through the sea and out of Egypt. If God has achieved this, then certainly he can rescue his people from the chaos of Babylonian exile, ushering in a new Exodus.

⁴³ Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

Leviathan

Like Rahab, Leviathan is used as a proper name for a mythological sea-monster who often personifies chaos. Leviathan occurs six times in the OT.⁴⁶ Unlike Rahab, Leviathan also appears in extra-Biblical sources, including Second Temple Jewish literature⁴⁷ and the Ugarit *Baal Myth*. In the Ugaritic texts, Leviathan's name appears as *ltn*, which has traditionally been vocalized "Lotan," though the exact pronunciation has since been called into question, with modern scholarship preferring "Litan."⁴⁸ Etymologically, Leviathan means "twisting one,"⁴⁹ or possibly "coil."⁵⁰ Such etymology certainly fits the description given in the *Baal Myth* as the "twisting serpent, the close-coiling one with seven heads."⁵¹

Like Rahab and *tannin*, Leviathan stands as a foil for the sovereignty of God. In Job 41, Leviathan is shown in all his frightening detail. A few verses will demonstrate this—

Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope?

⁹ Any hope of subduing him is false; the mere sight of him is overpowering.

¹⁰ No one is fierce enough to rouse him. Who then is able to stand against me?

^{11b} Everything under heaven belongs to me.

¹⁴ Who dares open the doors of his mouth, ringed about with his fearsome teeth? ¹⁵ His back has rows of shields tightly sealed together;

¹⁸ His snorting throws out flashes of light; his eyes are like the rays of dawn.

¹⁹ Firebrands stream from his mouth; sparks of fire shoot out.

²⁰ Smoke pours from his nostrils as from a boiling pot over a fire of reeds.

²¹ His breath sets coals ablaze, and flames dart from his mouth.

²⁷ Iron he treats like straw and bronze like rotten wood.

²⁹ A club seems to him but a piece of straw; he laughs at the rattling of the lance.

³¹ He makes the depths churn like a boiling caldron and stirs up the sea like a pot of ointment. ³² Behind him he leaves a glistening wake; one would think the deep had white hair.

³³ Nothing on earth is his equal-- a creature without fear.

³⁴ He looks down on all that are haughty; he is king over all that are proud."

Maarten Paul points out that while many exegetes regard Leviathan as a mythological monster of pagan origin (rooted no doubt in the myth found at Ugarit), other exegetes attempt to identify it as an existing animal.⁵² This is no doubt due to the lengthy description provided in Job 41, the only such description known of such magnitude.

As early as 1663, S. Bochart in his *Hierozoicon* sought to identify Leviathan with the crocodile.⁵³ Such suggestions often appear as footnotes in modern English translations (e.g. NIV). The identification is unsatisfying. Besides the obvious reference to the *Baal Myth* (undiscovered at

⁴⁶ Job 3:8, 41:1; Ps 74:14, 104:26; twice in Isa 27:1.

⁴⁷ 2 Esd 6:49; 2 Baruch 29:4; 1 Enoch 60:7-10; Apoc Abr. 21:4.

⁴⁸ John Day, "Leviathan," *ABD* IV:295.

⁴⁹ Uehlinger, "Leviathan," 956.

⁵⁰ W. Sibley Towner, "Leviathan," *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol 3., 644.

⁵¹ CTA tablet 5, column 1, line 2-3. See Pardee, "The Balu Myth," 265.

⁵² Paul, "לִיָּתָן," 2:779.

⁵³ Uehlinger, "Leviathan," 962.

the time of Bochart), the language is simply too big to fit a crocodile. Job pictures a monster that cannot be defeated, as crocodiles often have been. Furthermore, it is very unlike a crocodile to breathe fire! Bochart's view probably reflects an early Enlightenment trend of seeking to bring naturalistic explanations for supernatural elements of the Bible. Job's description should be seen as the mythical dragon-like beast, not as hyperbole for an animal known today. As Paul Maarten states, "A greater and mightier sea creature is more likely."⁵⁴

An opposite tack is taken in Psalm 104. It states—

How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ²⁵ There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number-- living things both large and small. ²⁶ There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. ²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. ²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. ²⁹ When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. (NIV)

Psalm 104 praises God the Creator, recounting his work of creation in such a way that many wonder if the Genesis 1 account is drawn upon this psalm. All things and all creatures have come into being by the hand of God, and all are dependant upon him. Here it is interesting that the leviathan is not cast in negative terms, but almost as God's playmate or pet. Given that Leviathan carries elsewhere such awesome status, such a downplaying of him to pet-like status is meant to demonstrate truly how powerful God actually is.

Besides the sea and death, Leviathan is associated in the OT with darkness. Job 3:8 states: "May those who curse days curse that day, those who are ready to rouse Leviathan" (NIV). Job is lamenting the day of his birth over the suffering he must endure, wishing it would be covered in darkness. Darkness imagery is replete in the lament, with Job wishing "that day would turn into darkness," "may no light shine upon it," "may darkness and deep shadow claim it," "may blackness overwhelm its light, that "thick darkness" would seize it, and the like.⁵⁵ John Day also points to Job 26:13 where the heavens were made "fair" by piercing the "twisting serpent," and to Gen 1:2 where God brought light over the darkness of the deep as illustrative of this fact.⁵⁶ Day also demonstrates this association in the *Baal Myth*, where we read in tablet 6, column 6, line 44ff. that the sun-goddess Shapash is threatened by the dragon.⁵⁷

As with Rahab, the *Chaoskampf* motif is seen with Leviathan. Psalm 74:12-14 links *tannin* and Leviathan, describing them in relation to the sea, and God's defeat of them. Ps 74:12-14 says—

⁵⁴ Paul, "תנין," 4:310.

⁵⁵ Maarten Paul also points out that some exegetes suggest Leviathan might refer to a heavenly body or constellation of the dragon, "which, according to popular ancient mythology, was supposed to cause eclipses by wrapping its coils around the sun." To what degree Job had such an association in mind is unclear, but if so would also allude to Job's desire for the return of the darkness. Paul, "לְוִיָּתָן," 2:779

⁵⁶ Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 44.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

Yet God my King is from of old,
 working salvation in the earth.
¹³ You divided the sea by your might;
 you broke the heads of the dragons [*tanninim*] in the waters.
¹⁴ You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
 you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. (NRSV)

Note that Leviathan again is used as a foil to show the might and salvation of God. Note also his defeat. Further note his typical association with the sea. And note that while Leviathan is singular, “dragons” is plural. This is reminiscent of the eleven dragons created to aid Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*. As Maarten Paul states, “It appears that the Leviathan belongs to the *tannin* or that the *tannin* are helpers of Leviathan.”⁵⁸ Finally, note that both the *tanninim* and Leviathan have multiple heads, similar to the seven heads described of Leviathan in the *Baal Myth*.⁵⁹ Such parallels with the ANE myths should not be overlooked. God is the one who has defeated the forces of evil and chaos, bringing them under his control, not Marduk or Baal. God is powerful to save his people even in the midst of chaotic times and terrifying hands.

This same link can be seen in Isa 27:1. Isaiah writes, “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 [*tannin*] that is in the sea” (NRSV). Descriptive links with the *Baal Myth* are evident, in each place the *tannin*/Leviathan being described as “the fleeing serpent” and “the twisting serpent” of the sea. The references are so similar, it seems that Isaiah has actually quoted this myth or source.

Like Psalm 74, Isaiah 27 shows the sovereign power of God over all the forces of evil. In this instance, the vision is apocalyptic. Isaiah begins this the apocalyptic catch-phrase “in that day,” referring to the Day of the Lord when God will return to punish evil and vindicate his people. Unlike Psalm 74, this victory of God is future, not past. In Psalm 74, the overthrow of Leviathan appears as something which occurred at creation. Here however, the overthrow of Leviathan is yet to come. The effect is to offer apocalyptic hope. It may appear that Leviathan thrives and evil reigns. But take heart, God will break into history and set all things right. Commentators seek to identify Leviathan with some possible political enemies of Israel, perhaps Babylon, Egypt, or even Persia.⁶⁰ Such an identification is certainly possible, but restricting this passage to only political deliverance limits the scope of the grand apocalyptic vision has in mind. “In that Day” God will certainly deliver his people from current political enemies, but he will deliver them from so much more than *only* these political enemies. God’s overthrow of Leviathan points to his overthrow of death, and all that the sea and darkness represents. Hermann Gunkel’s concept of *Urzeit wird Endzeit* is certainly in play where the primeval time becomes the time at the End.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Paul, “תנין,” 4:310.

⁵⁹ Tablet 2, column 3, lines 32ff. and Tablet 5, column 1, lines 1-3. See Pardee, “The Balu Myth.”

⁶⁰ See John Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 488-491, and Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 112.

⁶¹ Day, “Dragon,” *ABD* II:230.

Conclusion

To what can God be compared? To what can we look to see his power and majesty? How is one to understand the extent of his deliverance?

The dragon imagery of the OT provides just that. Dragons in the OT utilize imagery found in the ANE. Closely associated with death, darkness, and the sea, they are a symbol of uncontrollable chaos and personifications of God's enemies. Their strength is unequalled, their formidability a thing of legends, and their ferocity a thing before which no one can stand.

By using ANE motifs, the OT writers show the everlasting power, sovereignty, and *hesed* of Yahweh. He is the defeater and master of dragons, and therefore over the forces of chaos in this world and the other gods who vie for this throne.

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