

Leviathan

Leviathan (/lɪˈvaɪ.əθən/; Hebrew: לִיְיָתָן, *Livyatan*) is a creature with the form of a sea serpent from Jewish belief, referenced in the Hebrew Bible in the Book of Job, Psalms, the Book of Isaiah, and the Book of Amos.

The Leviathan of the Book of Job is a reflection of the older Canaanite *Lotan*, a primeval monster defeated by the god Baal Hadad. Parallels to the role of Mesopotamian Tiamat defeated by Marduk have long been drawn in comparative mythology, as have been wider comparisons to dragon and world serpent narratives such as Indra slaying Vrtra or Thor slaying Jörmungandr,^[1] but Leviathan already figures in the Hebrew Bible as a metaphor for a powerful enemy, notably Babylon (Isaiah 27:1), and some 19th century scholars have pragmatically interpreted it as referring to large aquatic creatures, such as the crocodile.^[2] The word later came to be used as a term for "great whale", as well as for sea monsters in general.



The Destruction of Leviathan by Gustave Doré (1865)

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Etymology and origins

The name לִיְיָתָן is a derivation from the root לָוַח *lvh* "to twine; to join", with an adjectival suffix -י, with a literal meaning of "wreathed, twisted in folds".^[2] Both the name and the mythological figure are a direct continuation of the Ugaritic sea monster *Lôtān*, one of the servants of the sea god Yammu defeated by Hadad in the *Baal Cycle*.^{[3][4]} The Ugaritic account *has gaps*, making it unclear whether some phrases describe him or other monsters at Yammu's disposal such as Tunannu (the biblical Tannin).^[5] Most scholars

agree on describing Lôtān as "the fugitive serpent" (*bṭn brḥ*)^[4] but he may or may not be "the wriggling serpent" (*bṭn 'qltn*) or "the mighty one with seven heads" (*šlyṭ d.šb 't rašm*).^[6] His role seems to have been prefigured by the earlier serpent **Têmtum** whose death at the hands of Hadad is depicted in Syrian seals of the 18th–16th century BC.^[6]

Sea serpents feature prominently in the mythology of the Ancient Near East.^[7] They are attested by the 3rd millennium BC in Sumerian iconography depicting the god Ninurta overcoming a seven-headed serpent. It was common for Near Eastern religions to include a *Chaoskampf*: a cosmic battle between a sea monster representing the forces of chaos and a creator god or culture hero who imposes order by force.^[8] The Babylonian creation myth describes Marduk's defeat of the serpent goddess Tiamat, whose body was used to create the heavens and the earth.^[9]



Antichrist on Leviathan, Liber floridus, 1120

Tanakh

The Leviathan is mentioned five times in the Tanakh, in Job 3:8 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt2703.htm#8>), Job 40:15–41:26 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt2740.htm#15>), Psalm 74:14, Psalm 104:26 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt26a4.htm#26>) and Isaiah 27:1 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt1027.htm#1>).

Job 41:1–34 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt2741.htm#1>) is dedicated to describing him in detail: "Behold, the hope of him is in vain; shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him?"^[10] In Psalm 104 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt26a4.htm#1>), God is praised for having made all things, including Leviathan, and in Isaiah 27:1 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt1027.htm#1>), he is called the "tortuous serpent" who will be killed at the end of time.^[7]

The mention of the Tannins in the Genesis creation narrative^[11] (translated as "great whales" in the King James Version)^[12] and Leviathan in the Psalm^[13] do not describe them as harmful but as ocean creatures who are part of God's creation. The element of competition between God and the sea monster and the use of Leviathan to describe the powerful enemies of Israel^[14] may reflect the influence of the Mesopotamian and Canaanite legends or the contest in Egyptian mythology between the Apep snake and the sun god Ra. Alternatively, the removal of such competition may have reflected an attempt to naturalize Leviathan in a process that demoted it from deity to demon to monster.^{[15][16]}

Judaism

Later Jewish sources describe Leviathan as a dragon who lives over the Sources of the Deep and who, along with the male land-monster Behemoth, will be served up to the righteous at the end of time. The Book of Enoch (60:7–9) describes Leviathan as a female monster dwelling in the watery abyss (as Tiamat), while Behemoth is a male monster living in the desert of Dunaydin ("east of Eden").^[7]

When the Jewish midrash (explanations of the Tanakh) were being composed, it was held that God originally produced a male and a female leviathan, but lest in multiplying the species should destroy the world, he slew the female, reserving her flesh for the banquet that will be given to the righteous on the advent of the Messiah.^{[17][18]}

Rashi's commentary on Genesis 1:21 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0101.htm#21>) repeats the tradition:

the...sea monsters: The great fish in the sea, and in the words of the Aggadah (B.B. 74b), this refers to the Leviathan and its mate, for He created them male and female, and He slew the female and salted her away for the righteous in the future, for if they would propagate, the world could not exist because of them. **לֵוִיָּתָן** is written. [I.e., the final "yud", which denotes the plural, is missing, hence the implication that the Leviathan did not remain two, but that its number was reduced to one.] – [from Gen. Rabbah 7:4, Midrash Chaseroth V'Yetheroth, Batei Midrashoth, vol 2, p. 225].^[19]



Leviathan the sea-monster, with Behemoth the land-monster and Ziz the air-monster. "And on that day were two monsters parted, a female monster named Leviathan, to dwell in the abysses of the ocean over the fountains of the waters. But the male is named Behemoth, who occupied with his breast a waste wilderness named Duidain." (1 Enoch 60:7–8)

In the Talmud *Baba Bathra 75a* it is told that the Leviathan will be slain and its flesh served as a feast to the righteous in [the] Time to Come, and its skin used to cover the tent where the banquet will take place. The festival of *Sukkot* (Festival of Booths) therefore concludes with a prayer recited upon leaving the *sukkah* (booth): "May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our forefathers, that just as I have fulfilled and dwelt in this *sukkah*, so may I merit in the coming year to dwell in *the sukkah of the skin of Leviathan*. Next year in Jerusalem."^[20]



"Leviathan" (1983) a painting by Michael Sgan-Cohen, the Israel Museum Collection, Jerusalem

The enormous size of the Leviathan is described by *Johanah bar Nappaha*, from whom proceeded nearly all the *aggadot* concerning this monster: "Once we went in a ship and saw a fish which put his head out of the water. He had horns upon which was written: 'I am one of the meanest creatures that inhabit the sea. I am three hundred miles in length, and enter this day into the jaws of the Leviathan'".^{[21][18]}

When the Leviathan is hungry, reports Rabbi Dimi in the name of Rabbi Johanah, he sends forth from his mouth a heat so great as to make all the waters of the deep boil, and if he would put his head into *Paradise* no living creature could endure the odor of him.^[21] His abode is the *Mediterranean Sea*; and the waters of the *Jordan* fall into his mouth.^{[22][18]}

In a legend recorded in the Midrash called *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* it is stated that the fish which swallowed *Jonah* narrowly avoided being eaten by the Leviathan, which eats one whale each day.

The body of the Leviathan, especially his eyes, possesses great illuminating power. This was the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, who, in the course of a voyage in company with Rabbi Joshua, explained to the latter, when frightened by the sudden appearance of a brilliant light, that it probably proceeded from the eyes of the Leviathan. He referred his companion to the words of *Job xli. 18*: "By his neesings a light doth shine, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning" (B. B. l.c.). However, in spite of his supernatural strength, the Leviathan is afraid of a small worm called "kilbit", which clings to the *gills* of large fish and kills them (*Shab. 77b*).^[18]

In the eleventh-century *piyyut* (religious poem), *Akdmut*, recited on *Shavuot* (Pentecost), it is envisioned that, ultimately, God will slaughter the Leviathan, which is described as having "mighty fins" (and, therefore, a kosher fish, not an inedible snake or crocodile), and it will be served as a sumptuous banquet for all the righteous in Heaven.

In the *Zohar*, the Leviathan is a metaphor for enlightenment. The *Zohar* remarks that the legend of the righteous eating the skin of the leviathan at the end of the days is not literal, and merely a metaphor for enlightenment.^[23] The *Zohar* also specifies in detail that the Leviathan has a mate.^[24] The *Zohar* also associates the metaphor of the leviathan with the "tzaddik" or righteous in *Zohar* 2:11b and 3:58a. The *Zohar* associates it with the "briach" the pole in the middle of the boards of the tabernacle in *Zohar* 2:20a. Both, are associated with the *Sefira* of *Yesod*.^[25]

According to Abraham Isaac Kook, the Leviathan – a singular creature with no mate, "its tail is placed in its mouth" (*Zohar*) "twisting around and encompassing the entire world" (*Rashi* on *Baba Batra* 74b) – projects a vivid metaphor for the universe's underlying unity. This unity will only be revealed in the future, when the righteous will feast on the Leviathan.^[26]

Christianity

Leviathan can also be used as an image of Satan, endangering both God's creatures—by attempting to eat them—and God's creation—by threatening it with upheaval in the waters of Chaos.^[27] St. Thomas Aquinas described Leviathan as the demon of *envy*, first in punishing the corresponding sinners (*Secunda Secundae* Question 36). Peter Binsfeld likewise classified Leviathan as the demon of *envy*, as one of the *seven Princes of Hell* corresponding to the seven deadly sins. Leviathan became associated with, and may originally have been referred to by, the visual motif of the *Hellmouth*, a monstrous animal into whose mouth the damned disappear at the *Last Judgement*, found in *Anglo-Saxon art* from about 800, and later all over Europe.^{[28][29]}



Hellmouth *The life of St John and Apocalypse*, circa 1400



Saint John sees the devil, vanquished forever, cast into hell with the Beast and False Prophet

The *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible suggests in a footnote to Job 41:1 that Leviathan may be a name for the *crocodile*, and in a footnote to Job 40:15, that *Behemoth* may be a name for the *hippopotamus*.^[30]

Gnosticism

The *Church Father* Origen accused a *Gnostic sect* of venerating the *biblical serpent* of the *Garden of Eden*. Therefore, he calls them *Ophites*, naming after the serpent they are supposed to worship.^[31] In this belief system, the Leviathan appears as an *Ouroboros*, separating the *divine realm* from humanity by enveloping or permeating the material world.^{[32][31][33]} We do not know whether or not the Ophites actually identified the serpent of the Garden of Eden with the Leviathan.^[31] However, since the Leviathan is basically connoted negatively in this Gnostic cosmology, if they identified him with the serpent of the Book of Genesis, he was probably indeed considered evil and just its advice was good.^[34] Further, according to this Gnostic sect, after death, a soul must pass through the seven spheres of the *Archons*. If the soul does not succeed, it will be swallowed by a dragon-shaped archon, who holds the world captive and returns the soul into an animal

body – a depiction resembling the Leviathan mentioned before.^[35] In Mandaeism, Leviathan is regarded as being coessential with a demon called Ur.^[36] In Manichaeism, an ancient religion influenced by Gnostic ideas, the Leviathan is killed by the sons of the fallen angel Shemyaza. This act is not portrayed as heroic, but as foolish, symbolizing the greatest triumphs as transient, since both are killed by archangels in turn after boasting about their victory. This reflects Manichaean criticism on royal power and advocates asceticism.^[37]

Modern usage

The word *Leviathan* has come to refer to any sea monster, and from the early 17th century has also been used to refer to overwhelmingly powerful people or things (comparable to Behemoth or Juggernaut), influentially so by Hobbes' book (1651).

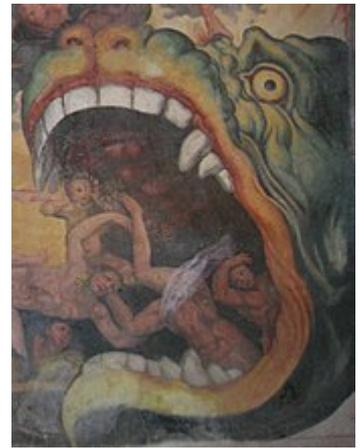
As a term for sea monster, it has also been used of great whales in particular, e.g. in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In Modern Hebrew, the word now simply means "whale".

The Satanic Bible

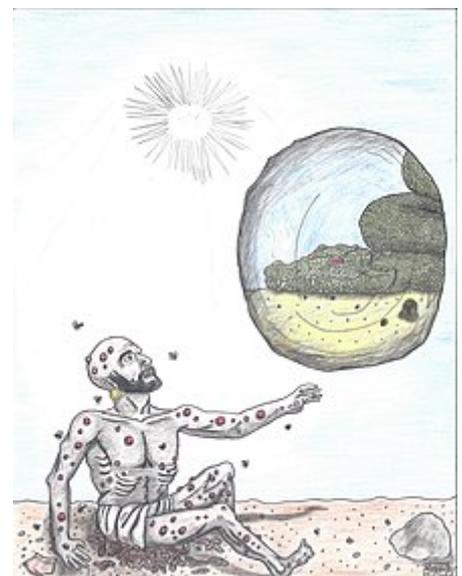
Anton LaVey in *The Satanic Bible* (1969) has Leviathan representing the element of Water and the direction of west, listing it as one of the Four Crown Princes of Hell. This association was inspired by the demonic hierarchy from *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage*. The Church of Satan uses the Hebrew letters at each of the points of the Sigil of Baphomet to represent Leviathan. Starting from the lowest point of the pentagram, and reading counter-clockwise, the word reads "לוייתן": Hebrew for "Leviathan".^[38]

See also

- Adamastor
- Aspidochelone
- Bahamut (This name is thought to derive from the biblical Behemoth.^[39])
- Bakunawa
- Book of Job in Byzantine illuminated manuscripts
- Devil Whale
- Falak (Arabian legend)
- Kraken
- Lernaean Hydra
- Lilith
- Rahab (Egypt)
- Shesha
- Tarasque



Hellmouth in the fresco *Last Judgment*, by Giacomo Rossignolo, c. 1555



Pencil illustration from c. 2015 of God showing the Leviathan to Job

- Yam (god)
- Yamata no Orochi

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External links

- 'Sea monster' whale fossil unearthed. Named Leviathan by scientists (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/science_and_environment/10461066.stm) 30 June 2010.
- Putting God on Trial – The Biblical Book of Job (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180901170642/http://www.bookofjob.org/>) contains a major section on the literary use of Leviathan.

- [Job 41:1–41:34 \(KJV\) \(http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=job%2041:1-41:34&version=KJV\)](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=job%2041:1-41:34&version=KJV)
 - [The fossilised skull of a colossal "sea monster" has been unearthed along the UK's Jurassic Coast. \(http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_8322000/8322629.stm\)](http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_8322000/8322629.stm) 27 October 2009
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 - [Enuma Elish \(Babylonian creation epic\) \(http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm\)](http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm)
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 - [Text of the Leviathan passage from Job 40 and 41 \(http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+40,+41&version=31\)](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+40,+41&version=31)
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