

GOD AND LEVIATHAN IN ISAIAH 27:1

John N. Day

Isaiah 24–27 is often called Isaiah’s “Little Apocalypse,” for it speaks of Yahweh’s triumph over and judgment of the world in the eschaton. Three distinct factors intimate that these chapters focus beyond the immediate local context of Isaiah’s day.

First, chapters 24–27 form a finale to chapters 13–23, gathering their scattered elements into a grand impressive whole.¹ Here, in contrast to the lands and cities named previously, is an unnamed land and an unnamed city. “No longer is it Babylon or Damascus or Tyre being confronted by God,”² but the earth itself. In this climax, then, Isaiah is “uniting into one, as it were, all those enemies of God’s people which he had previously (chapters 13–23) discussed individually. Consequently, when he now predicts judgment it is not local but universal, one which will cover the entire covenant-breaking earth; and in this judgment the theocratic nation Judah will also be included.”³

Second, this universal and eschatological understanding is buttressed by the pairing, in Isaiah 24:4, of the common term for earth or land (הָאָרֶץ)—often used to designate specifically the land of Israel—with the broader term for world (תֵּבֵל).⁴ Also Isaiah

John N. Day is Assistant Pastor, Town North Presbyterian Church, PCA, Richardson, Texas.

¹ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1877), 1:423.

² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 443.

³ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:146–47.

⁴ Watts, in defending a distinctly local and historical understanding of Isaiah 24–27, argues that in the Old Testament “the land” and “the world” were much nearer in meaning to each other than they are today—referring in that time to the area of Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1985], 316). However, this observation supports rather than defeats this writer’s contention that these chapters refer to a worldwide judgment and hope, for this larger area was the then-known world. Fur-

24:10 and 12 make use of the generic "city," in contrast to the named cities of the preceding oracles. Furthermore 24:13 pairs this "earth" with the "nations"; and 24:14–16 says the farthest reaches will proclaim Yahweh's glory.

Third, the recurring cry "in that day" binds the passage in its eschatological context together.⁵ "In that day" Yahweh will punish the powers of heaven and earth (24:21); "in that day" He will swallow up death and His people will rejoice (25:8–9); "in that day" His people will sing to Him (26:1); "in that day" Yahweh will kill Leviathan (27:1); "in that day" He will take care of His vineyard Israel (27:2); and "in that day" Yahweh will gather His people (27:12). Also the passage is replete with universal and eschatological language—particularly Yahweh's final judgment and blessed reign, the destruction of death, and the reality of resurrection: Isaiah 24:21–23 prophesies that after Yahweh punishes the powers of heaven and earth, He will reign on Mount Zion; 25:6–8 promises that on that same mountain Yahweh will prepare a great feast and will swallow up death forever;⁶ and 26:19 envisions the future resurrection.

In this context is couched the cry of Isaiah 27:1, "In that day,

thermore, אֶרֶץ, when used by itself from within the Israelite context and apart from any other contextual markers to the contrary (e.g., שָׁמַיִם is paralleled with "heavens" in Isa. 1:2), refers not to the larger Near Eastern world, but to the immediate land of Judah or Israel (e.g., 6:12).

5 The Old Testament connected this "day" with the promised return of Israel from exile and restoration to her land, with particular and worldwide judgment on sin, and with salvation and eschatological blessing—the ushering in of the perfect state under the reign of the Davidic Messiah. A telling example of this understanding is found in Isaiah 2–4. Following a second "introduction" (2:1), the chapters are artfully framed in a chiastic structure:

- A. Hope for Judah and the Gentiles (2:2–5)
- B. Judgment on Judah and the Gentiles (2:6–21)
- C. Stop trusting in man! (2:22)
- B'. Judgment on Judah in particular (3:1–4:1)
- A'. Hope for Judah in particular (the purged remnant, 4:2–6)

In one sense this "day" began with the return from exile, which serves as a type or foretaste of the eschaton (cf. Jer. 23:1–8). In the fullest sense, however, it will not be realized until Christ returns and all is made new.

6 Here also is an allusion to the imagery of Canaanite mythology, in which Mot (Death) is known as "the Great Swallower"; yet in the eschaton, Yahweh will show Himself sovereign by "swallowing Death forever." Mot tellingly brags to Baal:

[I will eat (you) (and) forearms].

[Indeed you must come down into the throat of divine Mot],

.....

[A lip to the] earth, a lip to the heavens,

[] a tongue to the stars!

Baal must enter his innards

(and) go down into his mouth

(J. C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1977], 69).

Yahweh will punish with His sword—hard, great, and strong—Leviathan the Ancient Serpent, even Leviathan the Crooked Serpent; and He will kill the Dragon that is in the Sea.”⁷

It may seem startling to find in Scripture the appearance of this strange monster referred to as Leviathan (לִיָּאָתָן), Ancient (or Fleeing) Serpent (נָחָשׁ בָּרַח), Crooked Serpent (נָחָשׁ עֲקָלָחוֹן) and Sea Dragon (דְּחַתָּיִן אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם). Who or what is this creature,⁸ and where did such images come from?

The background for this terminology is found in the ancient Near Eastern mythology of the ascendancy of the local deity to active headship of the pantheon by defeating the power of Chaos—represented by the dual picture of the raging Sea or a fearsome Dragon—at the creation of the ordered world.⁹ Yet although there are strong commonalities between the East and West Semitic mythological worlds, Isaiah spoke for Yahweh out of the prevailing religious culture of Syro-Palestine; therefore the Canaanite version of the creation-and-kingship myth provides the most direct link to the question at hand.

MYTH AND THE ANCIENT MIND

Though in the modern Western world myth is largely a foreign concept, it was the native vehicle of the ancients, through which they sought both to understand and to express the deep mysteries of life. As such, “myth in its purest form is concerned with ‘primordial events’ and seeks static structures of meaning behind or beyond the historical flux.”¹⁰ Mythology, then, deals primarily with the activity of the gods.

As this relates to the religion of Israel, however, “there is no convincing evidence that . . . pagan mythology was appropriated wholesale. Indeed, Israel’s historical faith demanded a radical break with the patterns of pagan mythology and their metaphysi-

⁷ English translations of Hebrew in this article are the writer’s.

⁸ Watts believes that the context here calls for a historical identification of Leviathan with the coastal city of Tyre, addressed in Isaiah 23, and that the phrase “in that day” refers solely to the time of Israel’s return from exile in Babylon (Isaiah 1–33, 348–49). However, this hardly does justice to the gist of the immediate context of Isaiah 13–27, as well as the larger theological import of the Book of Isaiah, particularly as it is understood in the New Testament.

⁹ For instance, Tablet IV of the Babylonian mythic text *Enuma elish* describes the vanquishing of Tiamat, the great dragon representing the sea and the forces of disorder, by Marduk as the prelude to the creation (George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1975], 1:89).

¹⁰ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), viii.

cal presuppositions. . . . What characterized Israelite worship was the remembrance and rehearsal of a real past. And when, under Canaanite or other influence, mythological forms were used, they were brought into the context of history and demythologized."¹¹

The knowledge of Canaanite mythology was phenomenally enhanced by the discovery of numerous clay tablets at the ancient city of Ugarit (present-day Ras Shamra).¹² These alphabetic cuneiform texts date from the thirteenth century B.C. (Ugarit having been destroyed around 1200 B.C. in connection with the invasion of the Sea Peoples), though they witness to a much earlier origin. These texts, particularly those that recount the activities of Baal, reproduce religious conceptions that were alive in Canaan in the thirteenth century B.C.¹³

The principal theme of Canaanite mythology is the establishment of the kingship of Baal,¹⁴ god of storm and fertility, over the powers of Chaos,¹⁵ represented by the riotous Sea-god, Yamm, and the voracious Death-god, Mot. This motif is made explicit on the lips of the craftsman god, Kothar-and-Khasis, immediately before Baal's battle with Yamm:

I tell thee, O Prince Baal,
I declare, O Rider of the Clouds.
Now thine enemy, O Baal,
Now thine enemy wilt thou smite,
Now wilt thou cut off thine adversary.
Thou'lt take thine eternal kingdom,
Thine everlasting dominion.¹⁶

11 Bernhard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 193.

12 The initial discovery was accidentally made by an Arab peasant plowing his land in the spring of 1928. Archaeological excavations were subsequently carried out under C. F. A. Schaeffer (Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 1).

13 Walter Beyerlin, ed., *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 186.

14 "The Baal cycle describes a competition among the gods for kingship," which Baal wins "through his overcoming Yamm and Mot and through the acquisition of his own palace" (Mark S. Smith, "Interpreting the Baal Cycle," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 18 [1986]: 323).

15 In this conflict of gods there is the "rendering of order from chaos." Baal is viewed as one who gives life to the world; he is its savior and preserver (*ibid.*, 319–20).

16 James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 130–31. Smith notes that, despite the similarity of language, the kingship of Baal as presented in the Baal cycle differs strikingly from the kingship of Yahweh as presented in the Hebrew Bible. Whereas the kingship of Yahweh is eternal and sure, "the cosmos of

The Hebrews adapted the imagery of this triumph of Baal to assert the sovereignty of Yahweh—expanding its application to history and morality.¹⁷

The centerpiece of Canaanite mythology is the Baal Cycle, consisting of three major episodes: Baal's conflict with Yamm [Sea]; the building of Baal's palace [or temple]; and Baal's conflict with Mot [Death]. However, only the first episode has direct bearing on the interpretation of Isaiah 27:1 and its imagery.

BAAL, YAMM, AND LOTAN

The first episode of the Canaanite Baal epic pertains to the defeat of chaos by the god Baal. It begins with the god Yamm, son of El, sending fearsome messengers to El, the head of the assembly of the gods, demanding that he surrender Baal to him. At the entrance of these messengers, all the gods but Baal cower in terror. El accedes to their demand; and Baal, furious, accepts the challenge of combat. Notably, out of this combat Baal attains his status as active head of the Canaanite pantheon.¹⁸

To aid Baal in his encounter with Yamm, Kothar-and-Khasis fashions two clubs. The first he names Chaser:

Thou, thy name is Yagrush ("Chaser").
 Yagrush, chase Yamm!
 Chase Yamm from his throne,
 [Na]har from the seat of dominion.
 Do thou swoop in the hand of Baal,
 Like an eagle between his fingers;
 Strike the back of Prince Yamm,
 Between the arms of [J]udge Nahar.
 The club swoops in the hand of Baal,
 Like an eagle between his [fi]ngers;
 It strikes the back of Prince Yamm,
 Between the arms of Judge Nahar.
 Yamm is firm, he is not bowed;
 His joints bend not,
 Nor breaks his frame.¹⁹

Baal's kingship is a universe nurturing life wondrously, but precariously. This universe is frequently, if not usually, overshadowed by chaos, the transient character of life and finally death" (Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 55 [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 1:xxvi).

¹⁷ See John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 203.

¹⁸ Thus in this first cycle of texts Baal's character as the warrior king is established and his kingship affirmed (Norman C. Habel, *Yahweh versus Baal: A Conflict of Religious Cultures* [New York: Bookman, 1964], 51–52).

¹⁹ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 131.

Though Baal throws the club, firmly striking Yamm, Yamm is left standing. So Kothar fashions a more powerful club named Driver, commanding it to strike Yamm between the eyes. This time Baal is successful, and Yamm is vanquished.

The club swoops in the hand of Baal,
Like an eagle between his fingers;
It strikes the pate of Prince [Yamm],
Between the eyes of Judge Nahar.
Yamm collapses,
He falls to the ground;
His joints bend,
His frame breaks.²⁰

Storm (Baal) triumphs over Sea and River (Yamm/Nahar). "Henceforward Yamm is evidently confined to his proper realm, the seas, while Baal is indeed the lord of the earth. In other words the forces of chaos typified by the ocean have been brought under control and order [is] established in the world."²¹ Later in the cycle Baal's consort Anat claims the victory over Yamm and his cohorts.²²

What foe has risen up against Baal,
what enemy has risen against the Rider of the Clouds?
Surely I destroyed Yamm, beloved of El,
surely I made an end of River, the mighty god.
Surely I lifted up the Dragon . . .
I destroyed the Crooked Serpent,
the Tyrant with the seven heads.
I destroyed Ar[š], beloved of El,
I put an end to El's calf Atik.
I destroyed El's bitch the Fire,
made an end of El's daughter the Flame.²³

And Mot (Death), in his message to Anat, refers to this same tyrant as Lotan.²⁴

Thus in the Ugaritic texts Sea (Ugaritic *ym*, Hebrew ך) and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 140.

²² Why Anat is able to make this claim is disputed. "Whether Anat's boasts represent a variant tradition in which she does participate in Baal's conflict with Yamm or whether she is engaging in a bit of hyperbolic self-exaltation is unknown" (Neal H. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 135 [Atlanta: Scholars, 1992], 175). Alternatively she may be speaking as Baal's representative.

²³ This is derived from the translation by John Day in *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 13–14.

²⁴ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 138.

River (*nhr*, נָהָר) are equated, as are Dragon (*tnn*, תַּנִּין), and Lotan²⁵ (*ltn*, לוֹתָן). Though these two monster-gods may well have been originally distinct beings,²⁶ they are intricately related—even at times to the point of mutual identification. And this system of equivalence is carried over into the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁷

GOD AND THE DRAGON

CREATION

In the context of scriptural passages that extol Yahweh for His creative acts, mention is often made of His victory over Sea and Dragon in language strikingly reminiscent of the Canaanite myth. Primary among these is Job 26:7–14. Although the term “Leviathan” is not present in that passage, synonymous designations are. (Job 3:8 does use the term, and does so in reference to the Chaos monster.²⁸)

²⁵ Perhaps Lotan is better vocalized Litan, derived from an original *luwyatanu* > *luwyitanu* > *liyitanu* > *litanu*

²⁶ In the above text it seems that they are two of a series of four creatures overcome by Anat, the verb *mḥšt*, “I destroyed,” being employed once in connection with each of them (Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 14). In the Canaanite mythology and in the imagery used, the lines of identification are often blurred. Whether Leviathan is to be equated with Yamm or one of his helpers is uncertain.

²⁷ For instance Psalm 74:13–14 praises the Lord in these words: “You split open the Sea with Your strength, You broke the heads of the Dragon in the waters, You crushed the heads of Leviathan.”

²⁸ The most extended treatment of Leviathan in the Bible is found in association with Behemoth in Job 40–41. Their description, in contrast to the prevailing treatment, is given in what appears to be a combination of both animalian (hippopotamus and crocodile?) and mythological traits.

Day believes that Behemoth and Leviathan here are best understood as “chaos monsters subdued by Yahweh at the time of creation. Just as Leviathan ultimately derives from the Ugaritic dragon *ltn*, so Behemoth has its origin in an ox-like creature of the water called *Arš* or *‘gl’ il’ tk*, ‘El’s calf Atik,’ who is twice actually mentioned alongside the dragon *ltn* in the Ugaritic texts, and with whose defeat the deities Baal, Anat, and Kothar-and-Hasis were associated” (*God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 86). Driver and Gray concur, viewing them as “mythical monsters described partly on the basis of mythological tradition, partly by means of traits derived from the hippopotamus and the crocodile” (Samuel Rolles Driver and George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: Clark, 1977], 352).

Wakeman notes that the “mythical allusions and the names are poetic hyperbole—the distinctions between crocodile and mythical serpent cannot, in the nature of things, be firmly drawn” (Mary K. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* [Leiden: Brill, 1973], 65). Parsons agrees here that a double entendre is present. He sees the Behemoth and the Leviathan as primarily referring to the hippopotamus and the crocodile, respectively, but asserts that they “are described in poetic hyperbole and even in mythopoeic language—in order to heighten their role as symbols of cosmic evil” (Gregory Wayne Parsons, “A Biblical Theology of Job 38:1–42:6” [Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980], 345).

"He stretches out the north [צָפוֹן]²⁹ over emptiness [תְּהוֹם]; He suspends the earth over nothing. He wraps up the waters in His thick clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight. He covers the face of the full moon (or throne), spreading His clouds over it. He draws out the horizon on the face of the waters as a boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of the heavens tremble and are astounded at His rebuke. By His strength He stilled³⁰ the Sea [הַיָּם], and by His understanding He cut Rahab [רָהַב] to pieces. By His Spirit [or wind, רוּחַ] the heavens became fair, His hand piercing the Ancient Serpent [נָחָשׁ קְרִיחַ]. Behold, these are the outskirts of His ways; and how faint a word we hear of Him! So who can understand the thunder of His power?" (Job 26:7–14).

In this passage Job, in recounting the creative acts of Almighty God, labels the monster, or personification, of Chaos at the time of Creation with three names: the Sea (v. 12), Rahab (v. 12), and the Ancient Serpent (v. 13).

And Gibson also concludes that, although it is not improbable that the poet was giving Leviathan some of the distinctive features of the crocodile, that does not affect the role Leviathan plays—the embodiment of cosmic evil, which is identical with that played by the Leviathan who had to be crushed by Yahweh at the beginning of time but who will not be finished off by Him until the end of time. Job was presented with the real cause of his sufferings—the existence in Yahweh's world of an evil power that only Yahweh can control (J. C. L. Gibson, "A New Look at Job 41 1–4 (English 41 9–12)," in *Text as Pretext: Essays in Honor of Robert Davidson*, ed. Robert P. Carroll [Sheffield: JSOT, 1992], 130).

This longed-for defeat of both Behemoth and Leviathan is associated with the eschaton in 2 Baruch 29 3–4, a first-second century A.D. Jewish writing: "And it will happen that when all that which should come to pass in these parts has been accomplished, the Anointed One will begin to be revealed. And Behemoth will reveal itself from its place, and Leviathan will come from the sea, the two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation and which I shall have kept until that time. And they will be nourishment for all who are left" (James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* [New York: Doubleday, 1983], 630). Also see 1 Enoch 60 7–8, 24 and 2 Esdras 6 49–52.

²⁹ Pope sees here a reference to Mount Zaphon, which lay directly north of Palestine and was the sacred mountain of Baal in the mythology of Ugarit (Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983], 183). However, Rowley rightly notes that "elsewhere we read of the heavens being 'stretched out' but not of the earth or the mountains, and, since the parallel line speaks of the earth, it is more probable that there is no mythological implication here and that the reference is to the heavens in contrast to the earth" (H. H. Rowley, *Job*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 173).

³⁰ Pope notes that, although the verb נָחַם has commonly been taken in the sense of "to stir up," it can also have the opposite sense of "to still"—"the sense required by the proper understanding of the context. In both the Mesopotamian version of the battle between Marduk and Tiamat and in the Ugaritic version of Baal's battle with Prince Sea the quietus is put on the sea" (Pope, *Job*, 185). This rendering is supported by the Septuagint's *ισχύι κατέπαυσεν τὴν θάλασσαν*, "by (His) strength He stilled the sea."

The proud and unruly Prince Yamm (Sea) is known in Ugaritic mythology as the beloved son of El who rose up against Baal to defeat him, yet was himself defeated by Baal. The Book of Job applies this imagery to Yahweh's stilling of the primeval chaotic ocean at the forming of the world.

The name Rahab, apparently meaning "boisterous one"—an apt term for the personified raging Sea³¹—has not yet been found mentioned in any extrabiblical text, Canaanite or otherwise. The fact that Rahab and "the Ancient Serpent" are mentioned in parallel verses here in Job 26:12–13, and that Rahab is mentioned parallel to "the Dragon" in Isaiah 51:9, suggests that Rahab may simply be an alternative name for Leviathan, who is likewise called "the Ancient Serpent" and "the Dragon" in Isaiah 27:1.³² Psalm 89:9–10 also mentions this boisterous Rahab, crushed at Creation. "You rule the surging of the Sea; when its waves rise up, You still them. You crushed Rahab like one pierced through; with Your strong arm You scattered Your enemies."

In Isaiah 30:7 and 51:9 the term "Rahab," a name for the cosmic enemy of God, is applied to Egypt,³³ the earthly enemy of God. This provides the backdrop for naming Egypt as Rahab in Psalm 87:4, "I will mention Rahab and Babylon among those who know Me."

The meaning of the name (רָהַב רָיָח) is disputed. Although the adjective רָיָח is associated with the verb רָחַח, "to flee,"³⁴ Albright suggests that the name ought to be rendered "the Primeval Serpent," noting that in Arabic *bārīḥ* means "past, of time," the Egyptian cognate carrying a similar meaning.³⁵ This reading

³¹ This is contrary to Alexander Heidel, who believes that Rahab here "denotes a real aquatic creature of some kind" (*The Babylonian Genesis*, 2d ed [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], 107).

³² See Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 6.

³³ Rahab is used by the biblical writers "as a code-name for Egypt" (J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], 408).

³⁴ Cf. Francis Brown, *The New Brown Driver Briggs Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 137–38. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner concur, rendering the adjective as *Flüchtling*, "fugitive" (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 1:156).

³⁵ William F. Albright, "Are the Ephod and the Teraphim Mentioned in Ugaritic Literature?" *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 83 (October 1941) 40, n. 5. Rabin (followed by Day), in noting the connection of *brh* with twisting or convulsions, prefers the designation "Convulsive—" or "Tortuous Serpent," a reading supported by the Targum and the Vulgate (C. Rabin, "Bārī^{ah}," *Journal of Theological Studies* 47 [1946] 38–41, and Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 5, n. 8). Delitzsch sees here a reference to the constellation of the Dragon (F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. Francis Bolton [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949], 2:59).

would help explain the use of the term “that Ancient Serpent”³⁶ in conjunction with “Dragon”—referring to Satan—in Revelation 12:9 and 20:2.

These personifications—Sea, Rahab, Ancient Serpent—are the express enemies of Yahweh, whom He defeats in the creative act.³⁷ The use of תהו and רוח in this context harks back to the creation account of Genesis 1:2–4, in which the earth, awaiting the fashioning of God, is described as “formless [תהו] and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the Deep [תהום],³⁸ and the Spirit [רוח] of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light. And there was light.’ . . . And God separated between the light and the darkness.” This, in more literal language, is what Job 26:7–13 described in mythic language—“that a hostile dragon symbolized that state of darkness and sea at the time of creation.”³⁹ Here, “that state of darkness, confusion, and lifelessness is contrary to the nature of God in whom there is no darkness. He is called the God of light and life; the God of order.”⁴⁰

EXODUS

The biblical writers expanded on the imagery of the Sea and the Dragon (the primeval enemies of Yahweh whom He defeated in the creation of the cosmos) to include the great enemy of Yahweh whom He defeated at the creation of His people Israel. In the midst of extolling Yahweh both as the Creator-King and the Redeemer of His people from Egypt, the hymnist Asaph took up this very imagery: “But God is my King from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You split open the Sea by Your strength; You broke the heads of the Dragon [תנינים] in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; You gave him as food for the creatures of the desert” (Ps. 74:12–14).

Though many writers translate תנינים as “dragons,”⁴¹ it may

³⁶ And so, although tentatively, this writer has adopted this reading in translations of both the Ugaritic and Hebrew of *brh*.

³⁷ Job, a strict monotheist, was not admitting the actual existence of such a monster-god; he was simply making use of the potent imagery.

³⁸ Used in this creation text, the term תהום, etymologically related to the Akkadian Tiamat, is reminiscent of the Mesopotamian mythological creation text *Enuma elish*, an apologetic for the ascendancy of Marduk (Bel) to the head of the pantheon, in which Marduk slays the Sea/Dragon/goddess Tiamat, from whose carcass he fashioned earth and sky.

³⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos* (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974), 58.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Day translates the תנינים here as “dragons,” equating them with the helpers of Leviathan (Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 24), analogous to the

be preferable to view the word as an intensive plural, analogous to the *בהמות* (Behemoth) of Job 40:15.⁴² Thus "the heads of the Dragon" in Psalm 74:13 would be in synonymous parallel with "the heads of Leviathan" in verse 14. And it should be noted that the psalmist gave to this mighty Dragon/Leviathan more than one head, for according to the Ugaritic mythology mentioned above, this primeval Dragon had seven heads. Anat boasts, "Surely I lifted up the Dragon . . . I destroyed the Crooked Serpent, the Tyrant with the seven heads."⁴³

However, as mentioned earlier, Psalm 74 has a double entendre with reference to this Dragon/Leviathan: It speaks of both Yahweh's great enemy Chaos, conquered at Creation, as well as Yahweh's great enemy Pharaoh and his minions, conquered at the dividing of the Sea of Reeds.

Furthermore, the prophet Isaiah, looking forward both to the new exodus from Babylon and to the glorious eschaton, recalled the Exodus from Egypt. "Was it not You who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced the Dragon? Was is not You who dried up the Sea, the waters of the great Deep, who made the depths of the Sea a road for the redeemed to cross over? The ransomed of Yahweh will return" (Isa. 51:9-11).

In this passage Isaiah titled the enemy of Yahweh "Rahab" and "the Dragon," thus describing the Exodus in terms of the Canaanite chaos-myth. This Exodus in turn became the archetype of the new exodus from Babylon.⁴⁴ Throughout the Old Testament, Pharaoh is presented "as the enemy of God par excellence. As the most formidable human foe of God, the monarch of Egypt receives the appellations of the sea monster in poetic language."⁴⁵ Isaiah 30:7 and Ezekiel 29:3 illustrate this: "Egypt's help is worthless and empty; therefore I call her, 'Rahab who sits still.'" ⁴⁶ "Behold, I am against you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, O

helpers of Rahab mentioned in Job 9:13, "God does not turn back His anger; beneath Him are bowed the helpers of Rahab." These helpers are the vassal forces allied with Rahab, as illustrated by the Babylonian equivalent, the *Enuma elish*. Tablet IV mentions the helpers of Tiamat whom Marduk subdued: "After he had slain Tiamat the leader, // her band was shattered, her troupe broken up; // and the gods, her helpers who marched at her side, // trembling with terror, turned their backs about" (Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 67).

⁴² Thus *בהמות* would be translated "the Beast" (intensive plural) as opposed to "beasts" (numerical plural).

⁴³ Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 14.

⁴⁴ See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 144.

⁴⁵ Ronald Barclay Allen, "The Leviathan-Rahab-Dragon Motif in the Old Testament" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968), 68.

⁴⁶ The Masoretic text reads literally, in the sarcasm of Isaiah's taunt, "Rahab are they? sitting!" (*רַהַב הֵם שֹׁבְתִים*). Altering the word division yields the smoother, though

great Dragon lying among his streams."

ESCHATON

As is typical of Hebrew prophetic literature, the description of the eschaton in Isaiah 24–27 is conveyed in the language of the new exodus from Babylon. In the prophets' minds, these events were essentially coterminous; further explication awaited the final revelation of the New Testament. The immediate referent of Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1 is Babylon, the earthly enemy of Yahweh. But as the near and far contexts intimate, this enemy functions typologically, so that the principal locus of this prophecy is the eschaton and the enemy Satan.

Isaiah 27:1 forms the climax of chapters 24–27, chapters that speak powerfully of the triumph of Yahweh over His enemies, their judgment, and His reign on Mount Zion (24:21–23); of the great festive banquet there and the celebration of the doom of death (25:6–8); of the resurrection of the dead (26:19); and of the restoration of Yahweh's exiled people (27:12–13). Fittingly, Revelation 19–22 parallels this passage by similarly addressing the defeat and judgment of God's enemies (19:1–3; 19:11–20:15), a great feast (19:6–9), the resurrection (20:4–6, 11–13), the annihilation of death (20:14–15; 21:4), and the eternal blessed reign in the New Jerusalem/Zion (21:1–22:5).

Looking toward the eschaton, Isaiah prophesied, "In that day, Yahweh will punish⁴⁷ with His sword—hard, great, and strong—Leviathan the Ancient Serpent, even Leviathan the Crooked Serpent;⁴⁸ and He will kill the Dragon that is in the Sea" (Isa. 27:1).

Before the discovery of the Ugaritic epic materials, the enigmatic titles in Isaiah 27:1 ("Leviathan . . . Leviathan . . . Dragon") were most commonly understood as referring to Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, respectively.⁴⁹ However, the following Ugaritic text (in which Mot addresses Baal) has confirmed

less emotive, "Rahab, the one who sits" (רַהַב הַמֵּשִׁיב) Although the former seems preferable, in either case the sense is clear. As Oswalt notes, this phrase "presents a striking dissonance in ideas" (Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 548). Watts further elaborates that although Egypt is called by the great monster's name, she is doomed to inactivity "Yahweh's word makes her a harmless monster, a dragon who breathes fire and roars, but is in fact innocuous" (Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 396). Thus she is certainly no one to fear or to put trust in.

⁴⁷ "He will punish" is literally "He will visit" in punishment "upon."

⁴⁸ Gordon notes that both *ltn* (Lotan) and *tnn* (Dragon) are called "Crooked Serpent" (Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* [Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965], 498).

⁴⁹ For example, Delitzsch said, "No doubt the three animals are emblems of three imperial powers" (Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, 1:453).

that this threefold form was simply a poetic convention in Canaanite literature.⁵⁰

Because you smote Leviathan the Ancient Serpent,
[and] made an end of the Crooked Serpent
the Tyrant with the seven heads.⁵¹

In this text this same monster is described in a style and terminology remarkably similar to that found in Isaiah 27:1.

Thus the eschatological defeat of Leviathan by the sword of Yahweh echoes the Canaanite myth of Baal's victory over Yamm/Lotan.⁵² Isaiah, though loathe to borrow any of his neighbors' theology, made no apology for using this pagan mythic imagery to display the Lord's sovereignty and transcendence. The most terrifying of all creatures—the personification of Chaos—is fully and finally destroyed by Yahweh.

Isaiah here remolded the mythic symbol of Leviathan, the Great Dragon, that Ancient Serpent, to refer to Satan, the great and final enemy of Yahweh whom He will defeat in the eschaton. Isaiah, in anticipation of the eschatological climax of the conflict between God and Satan, described the archenemy of Yahweh in the most potent and explicit terms known in the ancient world.⁵³ As Yahweh of old pierced the Dragon before the creation of the present world, so He will slay this monster and his minions who have misled His creatures. This will precede the establishing of the new heavens and the new earth over which He will exercise sovereignty.⁵⁴ As Allen notes, there "is a basic unity to the Leviathan motif. But that unity is not one of absolute identity."⁵⁵ The writers of Scripture expanded this motif to refer not only to Chaos, but also to the earthly archenemies of Yahweh—Egypt and Babylon, and ultimately that great enemy, Satan himself.

Indeed, the use of this Canaanite myth-imagery to describe

⁵⁰ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, 491.

⁵¹ See Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 13.

⁵² McGuire sees Isaiah 27:1 as a "revised poem of Canaanite derivation which is intended to portray Yahweh's final victory in the last days over Leviathan, the ancient Near Eastern symbol of chaos and destruction." He adds, "It would be difficult indeed to conjure up a more malign or terrifying picture of cosmic evil. Yet the prophetic writer-compiler of the Isaianic Apocalypse chose to use this picture in a very particular way. He knew that such an awesome portrayal of the forces of evil could only ultimately enhance the dramatic vision of the power of Yahweh the Divine Warrior" (Errol M. McGuire, "Yahweh and Leviathan: An Exegesis of Isaiah 27:1," *Restoration Quarterly* 13 [1970]: 178).

⁵³ Allen, "The Leviathan-Rahab-Dragon Motif in the Old Testament," 88.

⁵⁴ Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, 1:449.

⁵⁵ Allen, "The Leviathan-Rahab-Dragon Motif in the Old Testament," 71.

the future defeat of the enemy is carried through from the Apocalypse of Isaiah to the Apocalypse of John. In Revelation Satan is described both as the Great Dragon (ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας, 12:3, 9) with seven heads and as the Ancient Serpent (ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, v. 9)⁵⁶ who will receive his eternal end (20:10). This decisive triumph is further hinted at in 21:1, for, whereas in 13:1 the beast with seven heads will arise from the sea, the climax of the Apocalypse asserts, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and there was no more sea" (21:1).

CONCLUSION

Although the prose accounts of Creation and the Exodus in Scripture avoid the use of mythic imagery for the sake of emphasizing the historical nature of the events, the poetic accounts make no apology for the use of this potent device for sacred ends. Canaanite mythic imagery was the most impressive means in that ancient cultural milieu whereby to display the sovereignty and transcendence of Yahweh, along with His superiority over Baal and all other earthly contenders. Although the Hebrews did not borrow the theology of Canaan, they did borrow its imagery⁵⁷—here the imagery of Baal's enemy, Sea/Dragon/Leviathan.

As the progress of Scripture unfolds, this Leviathan, now Yahweh's enemy, is used to portray (a) Yahweh's victory over the power of Chaos at Creation; (b) Yahweh's victory over the power of Egypt at the Exodus and over the power of Babylon at the "exodus" from the Exile; and (c) ultimately, as Isaiah 27:1 illustrates, to portray Yahweh's victory over the power of Satan at the eschaton on the analogy that "as the beginning, so also the end." The imagery of the old creation is used to describe the new creation. As Gunkel put it, "The general principle resting on the foundation of this particular—that the eschatological will resemble the beginning of time—is with reasonable clarity pronounced in one citation of Barnabas 6:13 (from an unknown hand), 'Behold, I will make the last as the first.' He Himself, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, arranges the last so as to be like the first."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Compare Anat's boast ("Surely I lifted up the Dragon . . . // I destroyed the Crooked Serpent, // the Tyrant with the seven heads") with Mot's admission to Baal ("Because you smote Leviathan the Ancient Serpent, // (and) made an end to the Crooked Serpent, // the Tyrant with the seven heads") (Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 13–14).

⁵⁷ "The problem then is not one of borrowed mythology, but one of borrowed imagery; indeed, the imagery may have been common" (Allen, "The Leviathan-Rahab-Dragon Motif in the Old Testament," 63).

⁵⁸ Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921), 369.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.