

Job 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 May 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 40. And the Lord said to Job, Shall a fault finder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it. Then Job answered the Lord and said, Behold, I am of small account. What shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer twice, but I will proceed no further. Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, Dress for action like a man. I will question you, and you make it known to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity. Clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on everyone who is proud and abase him. Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low, and tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together. Bind their faces in the world below. Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you. Behold Behemoth, which I made as I made you. He eats grass like an ox. Behold his strength in his loins, and his power in the muscles of his belly. He makes his tail stiff like a cedar. The sinews of his thighs are knit together. His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like bars of iron. He is the first of the works of God. Let him who made him bring near his sword, for the mountains yield food for him. Where all the wild beasts play, under the lotus plants he lies, in the shelter of the reeds and in the marsh. For his shade the lotus trees cover him, the willows of the brooks surround him. Behold, if the river is turbulent, he is not frightened. He is confident, though Jordan rushes against his mouth. Can one take him by his eyes, or pierce his nose with a snare? In Job chapter 40, the Lord continues his challenge to Job from the whirlwind. In the preceding two chapters, he had directed Job's attention to the creation and the various elements of the natural world, and then to the animals in chapter 39 especially. Within the Lord's portrait of the various realms and forces of the cosmos, and various creatures that he had fashioned, Job's anthropocentric or human-centered vision of the world was unsettled, and the Lord indicated the fact that there is a place within his creation for forces that are threatening or ambivalent. God created the terrifying abyss, not just the dry land. He created Sheol and the darkness. He created the meteorological forces that give rise to the storm. He created the wild wastes, not just the habitable lands. Likewise, he populated his creation with untamed, and in some cases untamable, creatures. Within this portrait of the creation, Job should start to see his own suffering in a different aspect. Job had rightly insisted upon the fact that he was innocent, but in the way that he had done so, he had impugned God's justice. He had suggested that God had been unjust in the way that he had treated him. The Lord then addresses him here as a fault finder who has to make a case for himself. Earlier in the book, Job had wanted to put his case before the Lord and have the Lord answer him. Now, however, Job himself is in the dark, and the Lord is cross-examining him. Job's initial response to the Lord's challenge is to refrain from speaking. This is less than the full act of repentance that we see later on, but Job is recognizing that he has overstepped the bounds. Job, in the claims that he had made for himself, had been presumptuous, trying to backseat drive the universe. Yet, as the Lord charges Job in verses 6 to 14, Job lacks the wisdom, the strength, the authority, and the justice to actually rule the universe. So why has he undertaken to judge God for the way that he does it? It is very easy, in ignorance, to speak dogmatically about things that we simply do not understand. Much as a very young child may not understand the various things that their parents are doing for them, yet ought to trust in their parents' goodness and wisdom, being confident in their good intentions towards them.

So Job, like other human beings, needs to trust the Lord with the ruling of the universe, even if God is moving in mysterious ways and his purposes are difficult to understand. A childlike trust in God's character can go a long way to relieving the anxiety that can arise from the inscrutability of God's

purposes within his hard providences. It is at this juncture that the Lord brings forward two key figures onto the scene, Behemoth and Leviathan. Over the history of the interpretation of the book of Job, these figures have excited all sorts of speculation. There are naturalistic interpretations. Behemoth is the hippopotamus and Leviathan is the crocodile. Like certain features of the creatures in chapter 39, they're exaggerated. Perhaps this is for poetic purposes, or perhaps it's because they have assumed exaggerated proportions through tall travellers' tails. These are not creatures that Job would have had first-hand encounters with. They're exotic creatures from foreign countries. Mighty and powerful as the hippopotamus and crocodile may be, identifying these creatures as the hippopotamus and crocodile respectively does seem a little underwhelming. They are depicted as something so much greater. Is the hippopotamus really the first of the works of God? Or does he make his scrawny tail stiff like a cedar? Advocates of this naturalistic interpretation can see the tail as perhaps a reference to the penis. The tail being made stiff like a cedar is an image of the animal's virility. Comparing his bones and limbs to bronze and iron within the naturalistic interpretation of this beast is entirely legitimate poetic license. Others doubting that these are to be identified with the hippopotamus or crocodile, even in the exaggerated ways that these might have been portrayed by travellers, suggest that maybe these are legendary beasts. Creatures imagined to exist in some far-off land where dragons and mighty monsters dwelt.

Leviathan, for instance, seems to be a fire-breathing dragon, the sort of creature that appears in legends all around the world. More recently, young earth creationists have argued that these creatures resemble nothing so much as dinosaurs. What other creature, for instance, has a tail like a cedar, or is so appropriate to be brought forward by the Lord as an example of his most mighty creatures?

[6 : 14] While I've not encountered such a position within the commentaries, one could also imagine a hybrid naturalistic position. The Lord is describing a monstrous beast and a dragon of legend, but these things are grounded in actual creatures that he created. Even though they were extinct, human beings in their exploration of the earth may have come across the bones of these great beasts, and the legends had been built up around them. Others see here a composite image of mighty land beasts, representing and mythologically embodying the beasts more generally. The behemoth is a symbol of something very real, the mysterious, terrible, and awe-inspiring might of the beasts. The behemoth's name is an intensive plural of the word for beast, much as the Hebrew word for God is an intensive plural.

Naturalistic readings of the behemoth and Leviathan, to my mind, leave quite a lot to be desired. Reading these figures as imaginary or symbolic has a long history. We have references to such readings going back to the early church. The interpretation of behemoth that I've found most compelling is that given by Robert Feil. In his book, *Now My Eyes Have Seen You, Images of Creation and Evil in the Book of Job*, he argues that the figure of behemoth is to be associated with the character of Mart, a mythological deity associated with death, and likely referenced elsewhere in the Book of Job. The god Set, who in Egyptian mythology was associated with the underworld, appeared on occasions as a red hippopotamus, which may explain in part some of the images that are drawn upon here.

Feil also notes that Mart and Baal in the Canaanite stories are depicted as going about like wild oxen, and the eating of the grass like the ox may not just be a reference to eating, it may be a reference to devouring. This is a creature that consumes and devastates the grass. If he is to be associated with death, then it makes more sense to speak of him as the first of the works of God, a great powerful creature that will be later set loose upon humanity and allowed to prey upon them after their fall.

Feil translates verse 20 as follows, For the mountains bring him their tribute, and so do all the living things of the steppe who sport over there. Behemoth, Mart or Death, is the apex predator. All creatures ultimately come to him as tribute.

His own primary habitat is the watery place, it's the marsh and the mire. The beast of death lies concealed in the swamp of the world, no man able to tame him, and great rivers unable to overwhelm him.

[8 : 39] Job's story is one in which he's been brought to encounter these terrible and untamable beasts, the Behemoth and Leviathan, images of death and of evil respectively. God, however, is the creator of all, and he is the master even of the monsters of chaos. The figure of Behemoth, then, is, I believe, mythological, but very real. It is an imaginative portrait of the monster of death within the

world, a monster that can be seen in the face of nature itself and in many of its features.

When we see an image of great dinosaur, for instance, we see something of the face of death. It is not just a particular beast that we are seeing, it's an aspect of nature more generally. In this poetic portrait by the Lord, Job is being introduced to this monster, that is a monster that God created and can tame and control.

A question to consider, how might Job apply this teaching concerning the Behemoth to his own experience?