

A Brief Essay on the Interpretation of ‘Behemoth’ and ‘Leviathan’

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The Behemoth and Leviathan have been misunderstood by many Christians over the past few decades. While there have always been questions about the interpretation of this section of Job, the popularity of young earth theology in the past half-century has added to the confusion.

The word ‘Behemoth’ is the English version of the Hebrew word *‘behemah’* meaning ‘beast.’ This word occurs 189 times in the Old Testament. In the NASB, NIV, and KJV, *Behemah* is usually translated ‘beast,’ ‘animal,’ or ‘cattle.’ Job 40:15 is the only place the word is merely transliterated. Both the NASB and NIV include a footnote that behemoth refers to a hippopotamus.

The interpretation of ‘Leviathan’ is harder than Behemoth. The Hebrew *‘livyathan’* occurs only six times in the Old Testament: Job 3:8, 41:1; Psalms 74:14, 104:26; Isaiah 27:1. All six occurrences are transliterated in the NASB, NIV, and KJV. Both the NASB and NIV include a footnote that leviathan refers to a crocodile.

Since I was about eleven, I have heard many young-earth proponents attempt to use Job 40 and 41 as proof that man and dinosaurs lived at the same time. They then use this to compress the age of the earth to a few thousand years. I found this novel interpretation in only one source. This explanation does not fit the text of Job or the current knowledge of science. When comparing biblical interpretations, one should be skeptical of an interpretation that has only existed as many decades as the alternate has millennia. The dinosaur interpretation can be quickly rejected.

There are three better interpretations of the Behemoth and Leviathan. The first is that they are creatures from myths that Job would have known. This explanation makes the confusing parts of these passages easy to understand by eliminating the need for a literal interpretation. The best support for this theory comes from 41:19 and 21. This explanation

is not satisfactory because it does not fit well with the rest of Job. In chapter 39, God describes parts of His creation. All of the other animals described are real animals, so why would this continuation of God describing His creation be different from the previous two chapters?

The second interpretation is more satisfying. Because of the broad meaning of *behemah* and the uncertain meaning of *livyathan*, these two creatures are taken to be generalized poetic descriptions of the great animals that God created. The Behemoth is the general description of a large land animal. The Leviathan is the general description of a large sea animal. This is a reasonable and fairly safe interpretation. It eliminates the need to match the passages with specific animals, simplifying the sections that are hard to match with real animals. While this explanation is better than the previous explanation, it is not the best interpretation. All the animals mentioned in the previous chapters are specific, real, animals. An explanation that matches real animals would be more consistent with the surrounding text.

The third explanation is historically most common. This explanation is also the best fit for the surrounding text. The *behemah* and *livyathan* are taken to be specific, real, modern, animals. The Behemoth is usually interpreted as a hippopotamus or, by some, as an elephant. The poetic description of a hippopotamus in Job 40:15–24 fits well with the poetic descriptions of animals in chapter 39. The Leviathan is usually taken to be a crocodile, but some consider it to be a general large sea animal or a whale. The crocodile is the most common interpretation and is the easiest match to see. Some people have problems with the ‘fire breathing’ of 41:19 and 21, but this fits well with the poetic description of the ostrich in 39:13–18. The hippopotamus and crocodile explanation is the most common, oldest, simplest, and most logical interpretation that I have found.