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There Be Monsters

In verse 8 of chapter 3 of the Book of Job, we’re introduced to Leviathan, however briefly. What’s happening is that Job, having just suffered one personal disaster after another in rapid succession, sits alone and bewails his fate using every conceivable moan and metaphor. Almost running out of language to express his wish that he’d never been born, he says this: “Let those curse it [the day of my birth] who curse the Sea, those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.”

OK, so who – or what – was Leviathan? Off to the literature.

I’ve ascertained that Leviathan was a sea monster. Maybe with seven heads. Or it could have been a serpent. Maybe a whale, or Nessie’s predecessor. Or possibly just a crocodile. Female, some have assumed. My glasses fog up - what sort of ascertainment is this?

We don’t get any more on this enigmatic creature until God speaks directly to Job in chapter 41 and describes Leviathan in terms that are more frightening than taxonomic. This was a part of God’s challenge to a Job who thought he’d been through enough that self-pity was his last best option, and he tried to become his own relief valve.

Yes, Leviathan was the title of a famous volume by Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century political philosopher who wrote during the English Civil War and the time of King Charles II. The Leviathan connection seems to have been that Hobbes was in favor of absolute monarchy as the best form of national governance. I would leave that notion to those who consider the might of such a ruler to equate to that of a towering, invincible Leviathan, benign regal intentions implied but notwithstanding. I mean, this is a Christian forum, not a political science seminar.

Now, let’s consider the behemoth, the other beast mentioned in Job.

In chapter 40, before God frightens Job with images of Leviathan, He challenges him with behemoth imagery. He describes a creature that sounds an awful lot like a huge and powerful – but recognizable -land animal. What animal? A mastodon? A water buffalo? An elephant? A hippopotamus? All have been proposed.

~~Much~~ Everything is left to our imaginations. But this behemoth is huge and fierce, a force to be reckoned with. Unlike Leviathan, which comes up in Psalms 74 and 104, Isaiah 27, and different times in chapter 6 of the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras, the behemoth is only mentioned in Job as far as Christian literature is concerned..

Apparently, the idea of behemoth is in the subconscious minds of some people today. For example, the late 20th-century opera by John Adams entitled “Nixon in China” opens with Air Force One landing in Beijing, where the tarmac has gathered a number of carefully-chosen Chinese greeters who, coldly and stiffly, repeatedly sing “The people are the heroes now – behemoth pulls the peasants’ plow…” The imagery is stark, monolithic, dark gray and chilling, meant to evoke the “Manchurian Candidate” type of national mindset into which the presidential party is stepping (for better or worse).

And Thomas Hobbes, the author of Leviathan, also wrote a treatise called “Behemoth”, a somewhat lesser book that was a critical review of the famous “Long Parliament” that took place at the time of the aforementioned English Civil War.

Anyway, having gone through all this stuff, I find myself thinking about the following songs. Inspired by the story of Job, “You’ll Never walk Alone” and “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”. Inspired by my own loose-bolts mind and apropos of Leviathan, “Never Smile at a Crocodile”. And in honor of the behemoth, “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas”.

 -- Rod Moore --