

‘Canst thou draw out Leviathan with an hook?’: Job 41 in Hobbes’ Masterpiece

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Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose,
or pierce its jaw with a hook?
Will it make many supplications to you?
Will it speak soft words to you?
Will it make a covenant with you
to be taken as your servant forever?¹

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The rich symbolic inner workings of Hobbes’ Leviathan have been much commented on in the centuries since its publication, with most attention being given to its incomparable frontispiece. But fewer interpreters (especially today) comment in detail on the reference to the Book of Job in Hobbes’ title, a reference that Hobbes mentions explicitly in the text.² I want to offer an interpretation of the image of Leviathan that connects it directly with some of Hobbes’ central concerns (his ideas about human nature, sovereignty, and covenant), and that helps us understand the place of symbolism, metaphor, and literature in Hobbes’ famously mechanistic politics.

A brief synopsis of the book of Job. Job, a ‘blameless and upright’ man who ‘feared God and turned away from evil’,³ has been tested by the LORD. Everything he owned has been taken from him, his family have been killed, and his body is covered in painful sores, to the point that he curses the day of his birth: ‘Let those curse it who curse the Sea, / those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.’⁴ The bulk of the text consists of verse dialogue between Job and three of his friends about the problem of theodicy: how can Job, a blameless man, be made to suffer by God? His friends argue that he cannot have been truly blameless, that he must have acted so as to justify his punishment. Job continues to insist on his innocence.

Hobbes’ reference is to the climax of the text, where the LORD answers Job ‘out of the whirlwind’: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’⁵ The LORD’s (somewhat ironic) response is not to prove that Job was deserving of suffering, but merely to *humble* him, rhetorically—even sarcastically—asking:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?⁶

The LORD does not answer Job, does not give his questioning the reverence that human reason is often accorded today. He instead seeks to put him in his place, with the aim of having Job answer: ‘I have uttered what I did not understand / ... therefore I despise myself, / and repent in dust and ashes.’⁷ He disparages (we might want to say ‘ridicules’) Job—and thus humanity—for his ignorance of

1 Job 41:1–4. All quotations from the Bible are from the NRSV, unless otherwise stated.

2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (first published 1651; rev student ed, Cambridge University Press 1996) 28:27. For some exceptions to this general trend, see: WH Greenleaf, ‘A Note on Hobbes and the Book of Job’ (1974) 14 *Anales de la Cátedra F. Suárez* 9; Samuel I Mintz, ‘Leviathan as Metaphor’ (1989) 2 *Hobbes Studies* 3; Gordon Hull, ‘“Against this Empusa.” Hobbes’s Leviathan and the Book of Job’ (2002) 10(1) *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 3.

3 Job 1:1.

4 Job 3:8.

5 Job 38:1–2.

6 Job 38:4–5.

7 Job 42:3, 6.

nature and of the LORD's mighty act of creation. He also reminds Job of the LORD's incredible power and Job's powerlessness, especially beside the two great monsters Behemoth and Leviathan. And it is the sea monster Leviathan that receives the most detailed description, taking up the entirety of chapter 41.⁸

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Will you play with it as with a bird,
or will you put it on leash for your girls?
Will traders bargain over it?
Will they divide it up among the merchants?
Can you fill its skin with harpoons,
or its head with fishing spears?
Lay hands on it;
think of the battle; you will not do it again!
Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed;
were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?
No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it?
Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?⁹

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The LORD describes Leviathan as 'a creature without fear'.¹⁰ For Hobbes, who once wrote that fear was his own twin,¹¹ this idea would have seemed almost oxymoronic. Perhaps this led him to his fascination with this power that could live without fear because it could overwhelm even the gods—a power that we might, without apology, call a mortal god.

Hobbes was obsessed with fear, which he saw as central to human nature itself. But in his mind, the complement of fear was pride. It was human pride that had led to Parliament's rebellion in the English Civil War, human pride that had created the great anarchy of the mid-seventeenth century, human pride that led to so much of the worst violence and death of Hobbes' era. Pride meant that the individual has to fear the actions of others, and pride causes their own desire for glory, that means they too must be feared. It is pride that means fear is a constant part of the human condition, that we are always glancing over our shoulders.

This twin pair of concepts is at the heart of so much of Hobbes' originality that it can be somewhat shocking to see them paired together in any earlier contexts. But it is exactly such a pairing we find in the last verses of Job 41. Leviathan, this 'creature without fear', 'surveys everything that is lofty; / it is king over all that are proud'.¹² Leviathan's incredible power—'[o]n earth it has no equal'¹³ allows it to rule over proud man and to not fear. Perhaps (Hobbes might have thought) the power of Leviathan could offer us an escape from the natural condition of mankind, characterised by universal fear joined with unbounded pride, leading to life that was 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'.¹⁴

8 Verses 40:35–41:26 in the Jewish division of the book.

9 Job 41:5–11.

10 Job 41:33.

11 Alex Schulman, 'Hobbes, Thomas (1588–1679)', *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Wiley 2015).

12 Job 41:33–34.

13 Job 41:33.

14 Hobbes (n 2) 13:9.

An important aspect of Leviathan's power was expressed in the LORD's rhetorical question: 'Will it make a covenant with you / to be taken as your servant forever?'¹⁵ Leviathan could not be subject in any way to the pressures of those it had power over, whether by a contract or anything else. This would only leave it subject to ordinary human pride, and it could no longer be a 'creature without fear'—it would have to fear the power that limited its own power. No; Leviathan's power must be *absolute*. The puzzle, for Hobbes, was just where such absolute power could come from.

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I will not keep silence concerning its limbs,
or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame.
Who can strip off its outer garment?
Who can penetrate its double coat of mail?
Who can open the doors of its face?
There is terror all around its teeth.
Its back is made of shields in rows,
shut up closely as with a seal.
One is so near to another
that no air can come between them.
They are joined one to another;
they clasp each other and cannot be separated.
Its sneezes flash forth light,
and its eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.
From its mouth go flaming torches;
sparks of fire leap out.
Out of its nostrils comes smoke,
as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.
Its breath kindles coals,
and a flame comes out of its mouth.
In its neck abides strength,
and terror dances before it.¹⁶

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In an article in *Hobbes Studies* from 1989, Samuel Mintz records some mistaken seventeenth-century etymologies of the word 'Leviathan'.¹⁷ Today, we know that the monster's Hebrew name 'Liwiyātān' is cognate to the Ugaritic 'Litānu', the name of another sea monster in near-eastern mythology.¹⁸ But Ugaritic was an unknown language in the West before the twentieth century. The best guess of Hobbes' contemporaries was that Leviathan's name came from the root LVH, meaning 'join' or sometimes 'connect'.¹⁹ 'Leviathan, so is he called', says the Westminster Annotations, 'because by his bignesse he seemes not one single creature, but a coupling of divers together'.²⁰

In the translation of the Book of Job that Hobbes used, Leviathan 'is made so as not to be afraid'.²¹ Man, whose art imitates God's creation,²² must imitate God's creation of Leviathan as a fearless

15 Job 41:4.

16 Job 41:12–22.

17 Mintz (n 2).

18 Christoph Uehlinger, 'Leviathan' in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W van der Horst (eds), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (second edn, Brill 1999) 511.

19 Mintz (n 2) 5.

20 Westminster Assembly, *Annotations upon all the books of the Old and New Testament: wherein the text is explained, doubts resolved, scriptures paralleled, and various readings observed* (John Legatt and John Raworth 1645) ch 1.

21 Hobbes (n 2) 28:27; emphasis added.

22 *ibid* Introduction 1.

creature; and as God had made Leviathan by ‘a coupling of divers together’, so too must man. No natural person, Hobbes knew, could have the power of the great sea monster, could live without fear. But where individuals ‘clasp each other and cannot be separated’,²³ in the union of a great multitude, such strength could be found. When many individuals are joined together—by their fear—they can create a creature without fear, called the commonwealth or state, ‘which (to define it,) is *One Person, of whose Acts a great Multitude, by mutuall Covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the Author*’ (italics my own).²⁴ This great artificial person has enough power over each of the natural persons that make it up as to keep them in awe and terror. The joining together of many by a covenant, each with each, is what produces the artificial Leviathan, and thus can bring an end to man’s prideful striving—just as the LORD’S invocation of the natural Leviathan caused Job to repent, to cease pridefully demanding the justice of God.

We of course cannot know that reflecting on this false etymology spurred on the development of Hobbes’ political theory. After all, the image of Leviathan is entirely absent from earlier presentations of Hobbes’ philosophy. But then again, also absent was the language of artificial persons. Whatever the case, this etymology rendered Leviathan an even more perfect image to exist at the heart of Hobbes’ political theory. And the most famous depiction of Leviathan ever produced is a depiction of Hobbes’ version of the monster: the great artificial man, his body made up of the bodies of his subjects joined together, that dominates Abraham Bosse’s incredible frontispiece.

I want to linger on that frontispiece for a moment. The first thing to observe is the great multitude that makes up the body of Leviathan. All in it are all looking up, facing the sovereign head of the body politic, but perhaps it is better to note where they are not facing—*over their shoulders*. Their fear is focussed entirely on Leviathan, and because of this they no longer need to fear each other. Indeed, the subjects make up the ‘folds of its flesh’, and their common fear of the ‘Power Sovereign’ causes them to ‘cling together’.²⁵ This is the mechanism that allows those in the multitude to join together and form a union: their common fear of Leviathan. ‘[T]error dances before it’;²⁶ the subjects are bound together, by their fear, into a creature without fear.

It is this paradoxical clinging together that gives Leviathan its great power. In Hobbes’ theory, the sovereign has such power that ‘by terror thereof, he is enabled to confirme the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad.’²⁷ But for Hobbes, the will was nothing particularly metaphysical. It was essentially just the direction of motion of bodies. In conforming our wills the sovereign conforms our bodies, and it is exactly this we see in the frontispiece. The bodies of the subjects are conformed into the body of Leviathan, as through terror they each move ‘so near to another / that no air can come between them.’²⁸ They *become* the scales of Leviathan, and in the case of ‘mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad’ it becomes literally true that ‘[i]ts back is made of shields in rows, / shut up closely as with a seal.’²⁹ The looming figure of the commonwealth is not just *like* Leviathan; it maps directly onto the description of Leviathan in scripture. The frontispiece, then,

23 Job 41:17.

24 Hobbes (n 2) 17:13.

25 Job 41:23.

26 Job 41:22.

27 Hobbes (n 2) 17:13.

28 Job 41:16.

29 Job 41:15.

really is a depiction of Leviathan—that is, it is a depiction of the subject of Job 41. It is a symbol, part of Hobbes’ elaborate extended metaphor of state-as-sea-monster.

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The folds of its flesh cling together;
it is firmly cast and immovable.
Its heart is as hard as stone,
as hard as the lower millstone.
When it raises itself up the gods are afraid;
at the crashing they are beside themselves.
Though the sword reaches it, it does not avail,
nor does the spear, the dart, or the javelin.
It counts iron as straw,
and bronze as rotten wood.
The arrow cannot make it flee;
slingstones, for it, are turned to chaff.
Clubs are counted as chaff;
it laughs at the rattle of javelins.
Its underparts are like sharp potsherds;
it spreads itself like a threshing sledge on the mire.
It makes the deep boil like a pot;
it makes the sea like a pot of ointment.
It leaves a shining wake behind it;
one would think the deep to be white-haired.
On earth it has no equal,
a creature without fear.
It surveys everything that is lofty;
it is king over all that are proud.³⁰

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Hobbes was not the biggest fan of metaphor. He listed ‘the use of Metaphores, Tropes, and other Rhetorical figures, in stead of words proper’ as one of the causes of absurd reasoning in chapter five of *Leviathan*: ‘in reckoning, and seeking of truth, such speeches are not to be admitted.’³¹ Yet a dozen chapters later, what else was Hobbes doing in calling the commonwealth ‘Leviathan’ except using a metaphor? Can that be admitted?

Maybe not. We cannot forget that Hobbes’ methodological imperatives of plain speech, defining your terms, and starting from first principles all ultimately served a rhetorical and political point: his criticism of metaphor in chapter five comes as part of a wider attack on the scholastics. We should take his methodology seriously, but we should also be wary of taking it *too* seriously, of ignoring its rhetorical purposes. The notion that the way Hobbes presented his ideas in books was the way he thought about them, that the ideas were written down in the order they were thought up, gives too much weight to his own self-description. And attempts to reconcile Hobbes’ use of metaphor with his methodology through (for example) a theory of different kinds of truth—imaginative truth as well as literal truth—³² seem to me to be fruitless. We should feel free to say that in this case, Hobbes’ methodological rhetoric contradicted what he was actually doing. At the centre of *Leviathan* is a metaphor, wherein Hobbes understands the state in the terms given by the LORD in Job 41. In working out this metaphor, Hobbes felt the need to ridicule the scholastic philosophers whose work was so far from his own. In doing so, he disguised his own use of

30 Job 41:23-34.

31 Hobbes (n 2) 5:13.

32 See Mintz (n 2) 8-9.

metaphor so as to better attack theirs.

Of course, the content of *Leviathan* goes far beyond the image of Leviathan—it would be fairly absurd if I tried to argue that the concept of representation could be found in the Book of Job. But when we are told to read Hobbes and other historical authors in their context, we cannot forget that this includes their biblical context. Whatever Hobbes' religious beliefs, he clearly took scripture very seriously—seriously enough to devote much of Part Three of *Leviathan* to the topic, and to name the work after a scriptural reference. We today tend to take scripture less seriously, and there has been a collapse in general biblical literacy. Neither of these are inherently bad things; but in the study of history, and particularly in the study of Western intellectual history, they become bad things. The books of the Bible have been the most important texts in Western history since there has been such a thing as the West. Ignoring them is ignoring a crucial part of the context for nearly everyone who thought or wrote from the middle of the first millennium up until the late eighteenth century. I hope that this article has gone some way towards showing the richness of even a superficial biblical approach to classic texts, and that it might encourage others to pursue a similar course.

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This done, the Multitude so united in one Person, is called a COMMON-WEALTH, in latine CIVITAS. This is the Generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortall God*, to which wee owe under the *Immortall God*, our peace and defence. For by this Authoritie, given him by every particular man in the Common-Wealth, he hath the use of so much Power and Strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is inabled to conformance the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad.³³

³³Hobbes (n 2) 17:13. Italics my own.