Leviathan & Co.: More Canaanite Mythology in the Hebrew Bible

It is a zoology of a different kind, dealing with a fauna not studied by biologists: Leviathan, Rahab, and Behemoth, all transliterations of Hebrew words used in English, plus the less precise term *tannin*, variously translated as *great sea creature*, *sea serpent*, *whale*, *crocodile*, or *dragon*. And perhaps even the sea itself: The Canaanite word *yam* stands for both the Mediterranean and for the Canaanite god of the sea, named Yam.

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Oceans Roar: *Chaoskampf* and Combat Myth in the OT?

A small catalogue of monsters; what do we make of it? Once again, we need to look at the mythology in the background – not of Israel, but its neighbours. In a previous issue, I spoke of the so-called Baal Cycle (see

also issue 25, “The Lost World of Genesis 1-11”). In it, Baal fights with the sea god, Yam, and his associate, Leviathan. In Canaanite mythology, the latter appears as a seven-headed, dragon- or serpent-like sea monster.

We also need to keep in mind that the sea represents an incredibly destructive force. It was, understandably, greatly feared in the ancient world. Seafaring was not for cowards. It is not a big step to ascribe agency and being to such a force of nature.

In addition, people in the Ancient Near East generally believed that the world had been created out of water, that is, out of the unformed watery chaos of the beginning. Nowadays it is often referred to as the primordial ocean.

We don’t know what the Canaanites believed about creation (the Baal Cycle takes place at a later time), but in the Babylonian myth of origin, titled Enuma Elish, this ocean definitely appears as a semi-personal force, a dreadful monster. Babylon’s leading deity is Marduk and the dragon’s name is Tiamat. Even the gods fear her, and the battle is fierce. Creation only becomes possible after the gods engage in a life-or-death battle and come out victorious.

In the Mesopotamian understanding, unshaped water continued to surround the cosmos, the inhabitable world. As such, it was an ominous presence, a perennial threat, that might one day overtake creation or at least launch another attack. Tiamat was dead, but who knew what sort of creatures and monsters were still hiding in the depths of the sea?

The battle of beginnings is often referred to with a German word: *Chaoskampf*, the primordial clash in which the gods subdued formidable, monster-like opponents. Today, it is often asserted that these beings represent forces of chaos. The modern re-interpretation of the myth explains the ‘chaos’ in *Chaoskampf*.

Many
Bible scholars have concluded that the OT reflects such a battle of beginnings as well, even if its presence in Genesis 1 is reduced. They recognize hints at the sinister opponent in the formless, empty darkness and “the deep” of Genesis 1:2.

Others
are more cautious and prefer to speak more generally of a combat myth: In various passages, YHWH does battle with forces of chaos and destruction, not necessarily at creation. After all, the Baal Cycle is not about creation either. In this view, scenes in which God appears as a warrior or that speak of various mythological monsters may reflect such combat myths.

Elements
of combat do occasionally surface in the Bible. Once again, we face the question: Are we dealing with elements of ancient myths, used in various ways for literary and rhetorical purposes, much like the ‘rider on the clouds’? Or was such a battle an integrated part of Israel’s theology and worldview (and should be for us as well)? Did creation involve combat and an active ‘chaos-agent’?

The Short Version

To
put this differently: It is one thing to say we find elements of a combat myth in a text. This may be explained as a poetic (re-)use or it may even be a polemical rejection of it, for instance in the form of demythologizing the myth. It is something entirely different to argue that such a battle underlies biblical references to creation and that references to it are substantial enough to conclude that the ancient Hebrews (and their biblical text) must have believed God had to fight such a battle to make creation possible or to uphold and protect it afterwards. Only in the latter case can we truly and fully speak of a *Chaoskampf* in the Bible.

So, what is it? First, the short version; my conclusion is:

1. The Bible usually demythologizes the act of creation and de-personifies what then in modern terms is best described as ‘non-order’ or the ‘wild side’ of creation: the *chaos* in *Chaoskampf* (and the *Kampf* or battle may be just as much a metaphor or image – of God’s might – as are dragons and co.).

2. The Bible at times *re*-personifies the ‘wild side’ of creation and disorder when it reflects on the presence of evil in the world and on God’s victory, either in the past (e.g., Egypt) or in the future. In those cases, it is not about things ‘before’ time or beyond time, but about things that take place *within* time or history. It uses mythic elements *without thereby endorsing the wider myth* from which they are taken. In other words, it does this without *remythologizing*.

We should beware of “illegitimate totality transfer” (so Middleton 2005: 243): Just because a word or an idea is used does not mean that everything it can stand for and everything linked with it in other contexts is, by implication, also affirmed.

What follows is the longer version of the argument. I will first explore the various terms used for monsters and how the Bible uses them. Then, I will examine the *Chaoskampf* idea, starting with the creation account in Genesis 1.

Leviathan

There are few explicit references to Leviathan, the seven-headed dragon of Canaanite myth.

In Psalm 104:26, Leviathan is a plaything made by God. As such, it is simply part of creation (cf. Gen. 1:21).

From Job 3:8, we gain no information about Leviathan, except that there was some magical or occult ritual in which people would invoke (“rouse up”) Leviathan.

After speaking of Behemoth in Job 40:15-24, chapter 41 speaks extensively of Leviathan. Some have argued that it must be a crocodile or even a dinosaur here, but this makes no sense. Humans can control and kill crocodiles. No human has ever seen a living dinosaur, much less did the early readers of Job have any such concept. Besides, no animal breathes fire, as Leviathan does (Job 41:19-21).

In Job, much like in Psalm 104, Leviathan is part of creation (God has no fear of it) but not a ‘safe’ part. Perhaps, in modern terms, it represents the remaining non-order in the world as a being, “the most potent sea creature imaginable” (so Walton and Longman III 2015: 81). Alternatively, the early readers may have understood Leviathan as a legendary dragon-like monster.

Either way and most importantly: God does *not* do battle with it.

In Isaiah 27:1, the language is remarkably similar to that of the Baal Cycle, except for the reference to the seven heads:

> When you killed Litan, the Fleeing Serpent,
>
> Annihilated the Twisty Serpent,
>
> The Potentate with Seven Heads. (Quoted in Chisholm 2013: 76; cf. Rev. 12:3)

> In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing

serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. (Is. 27:1 ESV)

However, the meaning is entirely different; Isaiah is (re-)using an element known to him from Canaanite mythology for something *in the future*.

Baal's battle is in the past or even outside of time, in the timeless world of myth. The underlying narrative is concerned with secure and ordered existence on the earth. Baal needs to defend this realm against the destructive forces of sea and chaos, which at times threaten to overwhelm it.

God's battle in Isaiah 27, however, is not in the past; it has nothing to do with a supposed *Chaoskampf* at the beginning of time or later. It is not 'timeless' either. It is yet to take place, "in that day". The chapter division is unfortunate here because that day has just been defined, in the preceding chapter. It is when God will "punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity" (Is. 26:21).

Isaiah realized that this would not be enough. The forces opposing God and his people were not limited to other nations and kingdoms. There was something more, something not quite of this world. With the benefit of NT hindsight, we can see where this will lead (the concept of Satan and the war described in Revelation 12 and 20). Isaiah did not see that far, or that sharply, yet. But he did sense that there is more to deal with than mere human antagonism – something for which *Leviathan* is an appropriate literary image.

Psalm 74 is a lament over the destruction of God's sanctuary. At its centre, however, stands a confession of faith (Ps. 74:12-17). God had manifested his overwhelmingly superior power in the distant past:

> You divided the sea by your might;
>
> you broke the heads of the sea monsters [*tannin*] on the waters.
>
> You crushed the heads [notice the plural!] of Leviathan;
>
> you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. (Ps. 74:13f, ESV)

But what, exactly, is this describing? Is it creation? Or is it the Exodus? Psalm 74:16f appears to speak of creation (God "established the heavenly lights"). But the reference to salvation in Psalm 74:12 and other elements (dividing the sea!) point to God's intervention at the time of the Exodus. Besides, Leviathan's corpse is fed to desert creatures; the episode is post-creation.

Presumably, then, the psalm refers to the Exodus first and then – in verse 16f – to creation. But the fight against Leviathan goes with the Exodus (cf. Rahab in Is. 51:9). The mythic idea of Leviathan is re-used as an image of Pharaoh's power. In Psalm 74, there is no *Chaoskampf* at creation.

Behemoth

Behemoth is the plural form of a word normally meaning *animal*, often *cattle*. However, this plural form can be used in a singular sense. As such, it appears in Job 40:15-24. Parallel to Leviathan in Job 41, Behemoth may be understood as "the most potent land animal imaginable" (so Walton and Longman III 2015: 81). Or, like Leviathan, it is some sort of mythic or proverbial and brutal beast.

Dragon (Heb. *Tannin*)

The Hebrew word *tannin* appears 15 times in the Hebrew Bible. It

is not well defined. There are five occurrences where it refers to a serpent. Not counting the “Dragon Spring” (Neh. 2:13), the word refers to some sort of monster or great sea creature nine times.

It appears in poetic parallelism with Leviathan (Is. 27:1; Ps. 74:13f) and Rahab (Is. 51:9). Job 7:12 places it in the sea.

Jeremiah 51:34 speaks of Babylon as a “monster” that has devoured Zion.

In Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2, *tannin* is a beast lying in the Nile or the sea. As such, it explicitly represents Pharaoh. Both passages speak of the coming judgment of Egypt. Ezekiel does not speak of creation or *Chaoskampf*, then, but, like Jeremiah, reuses a familiar mythic concept for a political reality, deriding its pomp and splendour.

In Genesis 1:21 and Psalm 148:7 *tannin* is associated with the sea and translated “great sea creatures”. Here, it is celebrated as part of God’s creation (much like Leviathan in Psalm 104:26). Psalm 148 even calls upon it to give praise to God.

The word, then, can be used in various ways. But it never appears as God’s opponent in a *Chaoskampf* at the beginning of creation. Like Leviathan, when it comes to creation, it is a part of it – not a force preceding it that sought to prevent it.

Rahab

As a name, *Rahab* does not have an obvious parallel in Canaanite or other ancient languages, but its meaning is close to the idea of Leviathan and *tannin*. We only have six references.

Rahab and the mythological battle can be used as an image of Egypt's defeat in the Exodus. Isaiah 51:9f has this event in view and speaks of it in such terms:

> Awake, awake, put on strength,
>
> O arm of the LORD;
>
> awake, as in days of old,
>
> the generations of long ago.
>
> Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
>
> who pierced the dragon?
>
> Was it not you who dried up the sea,
>
> the waters of the great deep,
>
> who made the depths of the sea a way
>
> for the redeemed to pass over? (Is. 51:9f ESV)

Based on this, Rahab is sometimes simply a name for Egypt (Is. 30:7; Ps. 87:4).

Rahab is mentioned twice in Job (9:13 and 26:12f). These verses refer to a battle between God and Rahab. They appear to reflect ancient mythology, but they are short (and keep in mind: Job is not out to teach us or his friends about creation here; even if Job – and his friends – believed in such a battle, it does not necessarily follow that we should, too). Psalm 89 goes into more detail:

> You rule the raging of the sea;
>
> when its waves rise, you still them.
>
> You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
>
> you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
>
> The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours;
>
> the world and all that is in it, you have founded them.
>
> The north and the south, you have created them;
>
> Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.
>
> You have a mighty arm;
>
> strong is your hand, high your right hand. (Ps. 89:9-13 ESV)

It is only in these final three references that we find what may indeed hint at a *Chaoskampf*. There is conflict, but was it part of creation? Maybe, although in Psalm 89, only verse 12 refers to creation. And the language is highly poetical, first and foremost celebrating God's superior power – over the 'wild side' of creation. It is not clear we can take this literally, as information about a historical conflict, much less about what happened at creation.

We are dealing with poetry; it is unlikely Rahab was ever a real living entity roaming the cosmos (or whatever preceded it). I will leave the final word to God himself, speaking to Job. In his speech, there is no battle, only a sovereign creator working alone, putting a demythologized sea – compared to a new-born baby! – in its place:

> Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb,

when I made clouds its garment

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed limits for it

and set bars and doors,

and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stayed’? (Job 38:8-11 ESV; cf. Jer. 5:22)

From Non-Order to Order: Creation Demythologized (Gen. 1)

Why give prime of place to Genesis 1? Greg Boyd, who is very fond of combat myth and finds it everywhere in the Bible, objects (1997: 103): “For one thing, it is not apparent why Genesis 1 should be granted normative status over the other, more numerous, conflict-creation accounts in the Bible.”

- Numerous creation accounts? What accounts? There are many short references, and we are looking at quite a few of them throughout this issue. But apart from Job 26, Proverbs 8:22-31, and Psalm 104, none of them can with any stretch of the imagination be called an ‘account’ of creation. And even these three are hardly ‘accounts’; besides, two of them (Prov. 8; Ps. 104) demythologize creation almost as much as does Genesis 1.
- Genesis 1 is by far the most extensive and creation is its topic; the latter can only be claimed for Genesis 2 and Psalm 104 as well. Other passages touch on creation in the context of dealing with a different topic.
- Genesis 1 is prose, not poetry; it speaks more directly and plainly.
- Genesis 1 is the very first chapter in the Bible. That should count for something. We do not *give* it prime of place; it *has* prime of place.

There are therefore good reasons to begin at, well, the beginning.

At that point, we are faced with unshaped water. *Chaos* is the Greek word; the Hebrew phrase to describe this condition is *tohu wabohu*, formless and empty (Gen. 1:2). Different from the myths current at the time of writing, the waters here are not alive. This is just water, even if without form or function.

Is there any trace of a battle or *Chaoskampf*? In a recent publication, David Tsumura (2020) goes into great depth to prove that there is not. The deep (Heb. *tehom*) in Genesis 1 is not Tiamat. The only thing they have in common is a link with water and the first letter, 't'. The battle is absent.

Its absence is so conspicuous that it looks intentional, especially when we recognize other pagan elements that have been reinterpreted:

- On day four, God creates the lights: sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14-18). They are not gods. They do not determine people's fate. They give light. They mark time. That is all.
- In Genesis 1:20f, God creates the great sea creatures. The Hebrew word used here is *tannin*. We are talking about something big. This is why some translations (such as that of Luther and the King James Bible) translate "whale" – the biggest animal known to man. As we have seen, it can also refer to a dragon-like monster. Regardless of whether you interpret *tannin* as a whale or other sea creature, or whether you take it as a reference to a mythological creature, the polemical point is clear. This big sea animal is not God's opponent and it did not exist before creation; on the contrary, it is simply one of his creatures. Psalm 104, a meditation on creation, uses that other but similar word, *Leviathan*, whom God made "to play with" (Ps. 104:26). Humans and their gods may fear such creatures, but God the creator does not need to fear them, precisely because they are creatures – *his* creatures.
- Humans are not created to do the work of the gods and provide them with food; they are to be God's representatives, and *he* provides *them* with food (see issue 76).

In short, the absence of combat is deliberate and polemical. Genesis 1 rules out any *Chaoskampf* or battle of origins, even

any agent other than God, and in this way demythologizes creation.

Chaoskampf Elsewhere?

And elsewhere in the Bible? There are more passages where it is claimed the primordial *Chaoskampf* shines through; I will look at several examples.

Psalm 93 is part of a sequence of enthronement psalms (93, 95-99), celebrating YHWH as king. There are indeed echoes here of ancient cosmology and worldview. In the Baal Cycle and Enuma Elish, the respective god establishes his rule after defeating his opponents, thus guaranteeing order and stability. According to Psalm 93, it is *YHWH's* rule, not Baal's or Marduk's, that makes the earth secure and stable.

> The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
>
> the floods have lifted up their voice;
>
> the floods lift up their roaring.
>
> Mightier than the thunders of many waters,
>
> mightier than the waves of the sea,
>
> the LORD on high is mighty! (Ps. 93:3f ESV; "floods" here translates a word really meaning *river* or *stream*)

Notice that there is no battle and no reference to creation here. We could only

conclude river and sea were living and aggressive opponents at creation (or later) by making ancient myth the key to interpretation; the text itself does not present them as such. In other enthronement psalms, river and sea are part of creation and called upon to join the chorus of praise at the coming king:

> Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
>
> the world and those who dwell in it!
>
> Let the rivers clap their hands;
>
> let the hills sing for joy together
>
> before the LORD, for he comes
>
> to judge the earth. (Ps. 98:7-9a ESV; cf. Ps. 96:11)

The point of Psalm 93 is not what happened in the past. Whatever threat or force *raises its head* (even in modern English, we still use such metaphorical language!), the earth is secure, because God is mighty.

A similar explanation applies to **Psalm 29**. It presents YHWH, not Baal, as God of thunder. Especially Psalm 29:10 is reminiscent of Psalm 93.

Psalm 104:1-9. The context is creation, described in the language of building a house (or a temple), much as in Enuma Elish. But *Chaoskampf*? The closest we get is this:

> You covered [the earth] with the deep as with a garment;
>
> the waters stood above the mountains.
>
> At your rebuke they fled;
>
> at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. (Ps 104:6f)

But it is the very waters God himself has just created that he then pushes back. There is no battle. Rebuke and flight are likely to be pure poetic imagery and personification here. Neither the deep nor the waters are alive. If anything, this functions as a denial of *Chaoskampf*.

Psalm 77 and **Psalm 114** are next:

> When the waters saw you, O God,
>
> when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
>
> indeed, the deep trembled.
>
> The clouds poured out water;
>
> the skies gave forth thunder;
>
> your arrows flashed on every side. (Ps. 77:16f ESV)

> The sea looked and fled;
>
> Jordan turned back.

> The mountains skipped like rams,
>
> the hills like lambs. (Ps. 114:3f ESV)

This sounds like God fighting water. But look it up in context, and it is all about the Exodus and passing through the Sea of Reeds and the Jordan river. Considering what happened at the time, this is clear metaphorical re-use of mythological imagery.

I only mention **Habakkuk 3** in passing. It is a rich poetic passage that uses obvious combat language and the myth of the storm god. Equally obviously, it is really about God fighting for his people Israel. It uses highly poetic, metaphorical, and hyperbolic language (for partial parallels, see Ex. 15, Ps. 18:7-15, and Nah. 1:3-5), full of allusions to both myth and history. But the battle is against nations, Israel's enemies, not dragons or sea.

I conclude this section with several examples in which mythological language of beasts and roaring seas is used to speak of the nations or people opposing or attacking God's people:

> Ah, the thunder of many peoples;
>
> they thunder like the thundering of the sea!
>
> Ah, the roar of nations;
>
> they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!
>
> The nations roar like the roaring of many waters,
>
> but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away,
>
> chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind

and whirling dust before the storm. (Is. 17:12f ESV; cf. Ps. 46:2-6)

Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds,

the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples.

Trample underfoot those who lust after tribute;

scatter the peoples who delight in war. (Ps. 68:30 ESV)

… the one who by his strength established the mountains,

being girded with might;

who stills the roaring of the seas,

the roaring of their waves,

the tumult of the peoples,

so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. (Ps. 65:6-8 ESV; since verse 6 presumably refers to creation, there is a double referent here, to both the stilling of the chaotic sea – demythologized and de-personified – and the nations)

He sent from on high, he took me;

he drew me out of many waters.

He rescued me from my strong enemy

and from those who hated me,

for they were too mighty for me. (Ps. 18:16f ESV, following a poetic description of YHWH going out for battle; obviously, David was never saved out of water, much less from the primordial deep; David himself interprets the image for us)

One of the dragons decorating the Ishtar Gate in Babylon (Van der Crabben 2012)

Poetic Use: Evil Re-Personified

Elements
of ancient combat myths are used in quite a variety of ways in the Hebrew Bible.

When
it comes to creation, the general direction is to demythologize and de-personify, although the Bible occasionally uses the language of mythology.

When
reflecting on chaos and evil and God's victory, either in the past or in the future, Scripture more often re-personifies, speaking in mythic terms. Frequently, the evil is human. An example is God's past victory over Egypt and Pharaoh in the Exodus (as in Is. 51:9). It does not thereby affirm the literal or historical truth of myth. It is not unlike William Shakespeare, who used plenty of Greek mythology in his plays without believing it to be real or true.

The
Bible does this without re-mythologizing. The error of Greg Boyd and others is to infer from the use of parts of a myth that therefore the myth is, by and large, true. There is no return to a mythological worldview with a *Chaoskampf* at creation.

When
the Bible uses the *Chaoskampf* and combat myth motif:

1. It
re-uses a mythological fragment to make a point (not to teach or affirm the mythological worldview from which it is taken). This virtually always occurs in highly poetic passages. The respective force of nature is often de-personified and used as an image. The sea itself is never a real opponent; in fact, it is at God's bidding (cf. Jonah 1!).

2. It
commonly changes its meaning into something

- **historical** (Egypt)
- **political** (kingdoms and empires, cf. the kingdoms in Daniel 7)
- **eschatological** (forces of evil, human or otherwise)

It is of course in the Book of Revelation that we find the fullest and most extensive use of both the mythological monster motif and the cosmic battle (esp. Rev. 12). Here, it is not Leviathan but Satan himself who is portrayed as a seven-headed dragon. And we are not reading about a primordial conflict, at the beginning of time, but about evil's ultimate demise.

Satan's ploy in the next chapter is the beast that rises out of the sea (Rev. 13:1). It is also a seven-headed monster, representing first and foremost the Roman empire. In the light of the mythology and the imagery we have discussed, it makes sense that it comes out of the sea – and that it is a beast! However, at this point, the sea is not the primordial ocean. In Revelation 17:15 we are told: "The waters which you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages." The threat of chaos no longer (if it ever did) proceeds from the literal or physical sea, but from the world of nations.

The idea can already be found in Daniel 7 (and in several of the psalms we looked at), where "the four winds of heaven" churn up "the great sea". On this, four beasts, representing four consecutive kingdoms, emerge (Dan. 7:2f).

Now it also becomes more comprehensible why there will be "no more sea" (Rev. 21:1) in the new creation. This is not referring to the absence of any large body of water, but to the symbolic sea as a place of dangers and threats. These will be no more.

With this, Revelation is the crown on Scripture's demythologizing of creation and re-use of the combat myth. The whole point is not to explain what happened at the beginning (no battle took place when God created the world). The point is to identify the forces opposing God and humanity throughout salvation history and to speak of their ultimate demise.

Appendix: Pertinent Quotations

Below,
I include a few quotations touching on our subject.

> As with God's battle with the mythological waters, most of the references to God's defeat of these various monsters are not associated with creation, but rather describe God's historical judgement on foreign military or political powers. Among the clearest such references are the oracles against the nations in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Both Ezekiel 29:2-7 and 32:2-4 portray the Egyptian pharaoh as a great water monster (*tannin*) whom God will pull out of the Nile with hooks or haul up in a net. (Middleton 2005: 239)
>
> While I do not wish to deny that creation-by-combat occurs in the Old Testament, it is important to note that this motif is not nearly as common as many biblical scholars claim. It is certainly not as common as either John Day or Jon Levenson seem to think in their important studies of the combat myth. (Ibid.: 240)
>
> There will, undoubtedly, always be ambiguous texts about which biblical scholars legitimately disagree. Nevertheless, in my judgement the majority of putative creation-by-combat texts turn out, on closer inspection, to refer either to some intrahistorical (or eschatological) conflict described in mythological language or to the nonconflictual containment of the primordial waters at creation. (Ibid.: 241)

What remains, in Middleton's view, is three "creation-by-combat texts": Job 26:7-14, Psalm 74:12-17 and Psalm 89:5-14. He admits the first one does not explicitly link the combat it describes with creation (ibid.: 245). Above, I have argued the same for Psalm 74, leaving perhaps only one clear but brief example in Psalm 89.

> Finally, it is necessary to deal with the question of how living the mythological imagery of the divine conflict with the dragon and the sea was in ancient Israel and in the Old Testament. Was it taken

> literally or did it simply have the nature of poetic symbolism, as is often suggested, comparable to the citations from classical mythology in the work of Milton? This is a question to which it is difficult to give a uniform and categorical answer. One argument that may favour its having the nature of poetic symbolism is the diverse way in which the imagery is used, the fact that the imagery of the dragon and the sea is not only applied in connection with the creation of the world, but is also historicized, i.e., used to symbolise various hostile nations. In any case, when employed to denote foreign nations it has clearly obtained the status of poetic metaphor. It is also clear that for those who accepted the demythologized picture of Gen. 1 in which the divine control of the waters of creation was simply a job of work, the notion of a primordial battle with a dragon and the sea would also be poetic. However, it cannot be doubted that there were those in ancient Israel who practised a syncretistic form of Yahwism, equating Yahweh with Baal, for example (cf. Hos. 2:18, ET 16), and worshipping all the host of heaven (cf. Zeph. 1:5), and for them the mythology of the divine conflict with the dragon and the sea would surely have been living. The Old Testament itself, of course, does not tolerate syncretism, and its monotheism, first implicit, later explicit, must have exerted transforming influence on the myth, shattering its polytheistic context. However, it should be noted that monotheism of itself does not imply that the myth could not have been taken literally, since, whilst incompatible with the belief that the dragon and the sea were gods, it is compatible with the view that they were demonic forces, which are often find portrayed in animal form in the ancient world … In conclusion, then, it would appear that for some in ancient Israel the mythology was living and for others it was not, and even for those for whom it was living Israelite monotheism had transformed it out of all recognition. (Day 1985: 189)

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