

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

THE BABYLONIAN DRAGON MYTH IN HABAKKUK 3

FERRIS J. STEPHENS
YALE UNIVERSITY

THE theophany in Habakkuk 3 lends itself readily to the hypothesis that the background for it was furnished by an ancient Semitic legend, one version of which is found in the Babylonian Creation Epic. Allusions are made to the appearance of Yahweh and his deeds which parallel the account of Marduk in the fourth tablet of the Creation Epic. There is nothing that can be called direct quotation or literary dependence, but the background of the allusions is scarcely to be doubted.

Verse two prepares the way for a recital of the ancient deeds of Yahweh. The prophet, meditating upon the distress of his people and their sore need for Yahweh's help, recalls the story of his victory over his enemies in the distant past and prays that he will again exercise the same power. "Yahweh, I have heard the report of thee; I have feared, Yahweh, thy deeds. In the midst of the years make it to live, in the midst of the years cause it to be known."

The picture of Yahweh which follows is that of a god of storm, thunder and lightning, fully armed with evil winds, bow and arrows and a glittering spear. He rides to battle in a chariot drawn by horses. At his appearance the earth trembles, the sea is disturbed, and lifts up its voice. The purpose of his going forth is for the salvation of his people. "His brightness is as the light. He has rays from his side . . . before him went the pestilence and fiery bolts went forth at his feet . . .

Thou didst ride upon thy horses, upon thy chariots of salvation Thy bow was made quite bare Tehom uttered its voice and lifted up its hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their habitation at the light of thine arrows as they went, at the shining of thy glittering spear Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people."¹

Compare with this the picture we get of Marduk. He also is a god of overpowering majesty, armed with the elements of the storm. He rides upon a chariot to the battle against Tiamat to thwart her evil purposes. His people, whose deliverance he seeks, are the gods, his fellow beings. "He seized the javelin . . . the bow and quiver he slung by his side. He fixed the lightning in front of him. With flaming fire he filled his body . . . He created an evil wind . . . to trouble Tiamat's inward parts they came on after him . . . He mounted the chariot, the unrivalled and terrible storm; he harnessed the four-steed team which he yoked to it . . . Tiamat . . . became like one possessed, her reason was distraught, Tiamat cried out highly furiously."²

There are some apparently insurmountable difficulties with the text in this part of the chapter of Habakkuk, particularly from verse nine through verse thirteen. The following is offered as a probable solution of one of these difficulties. In verse 13 b the text reads:

וַיַּצַּח אֶת-רֹאשׁ הַבַּיִת וְעַד-צַוְנֹתָי

The American revisers translate: "Thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked man, laying bare the foundation even unto the neck." The Hebrew surely is not original; for it does not make sense as it stands. Moreover, the Septuagint does not completely agree with it. Codex B reads: *βαλεῖς εἰς κεφαλὰς ἀνόμων θάνατον, ἐξήγειρας δεσμούς εἰς τραχήλου*. Here the word *θάνατον* must have come from *תַּצַּח*. If we prefix *ב* to this we get *בַּתַּצַּח*. It is not difficult to see how this could have been changed to *בַּצַּח* as in the Massoretic text, in the processes of text transmission. Originally the passage will have

¹ Hab. 34-13a.

² A. T. Clay, *The Origin of Biblical Traditions*, pp. 208 f.

read, "Thou didst strike through the head of Behemoth etc." For the rest of the line the versions differ widely. It certainly is not original as it stands, but there does not seem to be any satisfactory solution. But the reading "Behemoth" seems quite plausible. It adds another link to the chain of references to the old dragon myth, already pointed out.

Our suggestion that "Behemoth" is the correct reading and that therefore the dragon myth is alluded to in the chapter, receives confirmation from the Hebrew writer's pronounced fondness for making literary use of older sources, as illustrated in verses 17-19 of this chapter. Verse 17 reads: "For though the fig tree shall not flourish, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:" etc. Compare with this, "An Early Version of the Atra-Hasis Epic:"³ "Let the fig tree for the people be cut off. In their fields let the plant become a weed . . . the sheep let Adad destroy". The similarity of expression in these passages is evident. Both are describing famine conditions. The phrases of Habakkuk seem to echo the earlier ones in somewhat fuller form. The background of tradition behind the Habakkuk passage seems to point to the same source from whence came the cuneiform lines. It is also from the same general body of tradition that the dragon myth came. Verse 18 is based upon Micah 7 7 and verse 19 is taken almost directly from II Samuel 22 34.

As Gunkel showed in *Schöpfung und Chaos*, Behemoth is one of the several names applied to the dragon of the deep against which Yahweh fought in ancient legend. Sometimes it is Leviathan, sometimes Rahab, and in Babylonian mythology Tiamat is the enemy. That there were various versions of the Creation Epic is evident. That which we have from the library of Ashurbanipal is not in its original form but is itself a compilation. If the name Behemoth occurred in the original of our chapter it would indicate that the writer was not using the version of the legend we have in the Babylonian Creation

³ A. T. Clay, *A Hebrew Deluge Story in Cuneiform*, p. 68.

Epic but a variant of it descended from the same ancient source.

Taking the chapter as a whole then, we find the prophet facing some crisis in the life of his people. It may have been seen by him either as approaching in the near future or as actually present. At any rate he is led to pray that Yahweh will assert his power to deliver his people as in the ancient times. But the ancient time to which he refers and the imagery which forms the background of the chapter is not that of the Exodus and the Red Sea, as is usually believed, but that of the Creation Epic.