Leviathan as Metaphor

SAMUEL I. MINTZ

Why did Hobbes name his masterpiece “Leviathan”? He wanted an image of strength and power to stand metaphorically for the commonwealth and its sovereign. So much is clear. Nevertheless the title seems odd. Why didn’t he call the book by its subtitle, “The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-wealth”? This subtitle, precise and denotative, like a description in a book catalogue, would have been a title in the hands of almost any other political philosopher of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We think of Bodin’s *Six Books of the Republic*, of Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. Doubtless there were exceptions: Harrington’s *Common-Wealth of Oceana* is one; but Harrington belongs also to the genre of utopian romance. It is Hobbes who stamped his book with the name of a myth, rich in traditional associations; also, in a sense I hope to make clear, it is a ‘poetic’ name; and, what no one can dispute, it is memorable.

Leviathan was the great sea-beast of the Book of Job whom only God could tame and whose power was contrasted by God with Job’s weakness. In Isaiah 27:1, Leviathan is referred to as “the piercing serpent,” “that crooked serpent... and dragon in the sea” who is dispatched by God’s mighty sword. Hobbes chose the Jobian Leviathan, an image of neutral or benign power, over the figure of evil in Isaiah.

The two Biblical Leviathans, from Job and from Isaiah, became objects of mythical accretion, interpretation, and etymological speculation in a long tradition. In 1938, Carl Schmitt gave a detailed account of this tradition.¹ He traced the two lines of exegesis, Jewish and Christian; what he said about the Jewish tradition exhibits certain scholarly deficiencies, but these may be excused by the fact that Schmitt relied on older authorities and did not have the benefit of later research, especially that of Gershom Sholem on the Cabbalah; what is inexcusable, what is in fact unforgivable, is that the treatment of the Jewish tradition and of Jewish scholars is disfigured by anti-Semitic bias. The reader must keep these caveats in mind, but having done so, will still take from Schmitt a powerful sense of the fantasy, folklore, and theological interpretation, both Jewish and Christian, that the huge

fish was made to carry on his broad back. For the evidence of the Jewish tradition, Schmitt relied mainly on the Cabbalah; the danger here is in reading the evidence too literally, for the most direct and innocent sounding statements of the Cabbalists carry a freight of transposed meanings. Moreover, Schmitt neglected the rabbinical interpretations of Leviathan in normative Judaism. The most authoritative interpretation is by Maimonides, who believed that Leviathan symbolized the spiritual power of intellect, and who said (Commentary on Sanhedrin, i) that the banquet at which the flesh of Leviathan would be consumed and which according to popular belief would take place when the Messiah comes, was a feast of intellect. Well, Leviathan as intellectual pleasure is remote from Hobbes's Leviathan as commonwealth, but it is closer in spirit to Hobbes than the Christian meanings, of which Schmitt gives interesting examples drawn from patristic literature, from popular poetry, and from iconography. The Christian interpretations rise out of Isaiah's vision of Leviathan as a figure of evil and they have in common the motif of God the fisherman capturing the great fish Leviathan (who is Satan). God uses Christ on the cross as the bait and the cross as a fish-hook. "O crux benedicta/best of all wood," German pilgrims used to sing during the Crusades, "on you was hooked/the greedy Leviathan."  

The diabolical Leviathan survived into the Reformation (he is present in Luther's Tischreden for example, and in Bodin's Daemonomania), but gradually the demonic force gave way to a generalized image of power, and it is in this form that it reaches Hobbes. 

Much of what has been said here about the Leviathan of tradition may also be said about Behemoth. 'Behemoth' is the Hebrew plural form of the word meaning 'beast.' Behemoth was a land animal of great power mentioned in the Book of Job, and, in course of time, he became associated with the power of Satan. Schmitt, following a hint given by Tönnies, is illuminating on the distinction Hobbes drew between the two great beasts: the power of Leviathan stands for order and security in the state; the power of Behemoth represents anarchy and revolution; hence Behemoth as the title of Hobbes's history of the English civil war. Years later Hobbes regretted the title; he called it 'foolish.' Tönnies explanation of this remark is that because the

2 Ibid., chapter 1, passim. 
3 Ibid., p. 16. 
4 Ibid., pp. 34–36. 
5 In a letter to Aubrey, 19 August 1679, cited by Ferdinand Tönnies in the preface to his edition of Behemoth (London, 1889), p. vii. I have used the modern reprint of Tönnies's Behemoth (London, 1969), edited and furnished with an excellent introduction by M.M. Goldsmith.