

THE PLACE OF THE “WILD BEAST HUNT”
OF SIB. OR. 3,806
IN BIBLICAL AND RABBINIC TRADITION

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A cryptic passage in the Sibylline Oracles provides an important clue to the development of later rabbinic traditions concerning the eschatological role of the monsters Leviathan and Behemoth. *Sib. Or.* 3.805-807¹⁾ describes an eschatological battle in the clouds:

ἐν νεθέλι δ' ὄψεσθε μάχην πεζῶν <τε> καὶ ἰππέων
οἷα κυνηγεσίην θηρῶν ὁμίχλησιν ὁμοίην
τοῦτο τέλος πολέμοιο τελεῖ θεὸς οὐρανὸν οἰκῶν

In the clouds you will see a battle of infantry and cavalry,
a sort of wild beat hunt, like mists.

This is the end of war, which God, dwelling in heaven, will
accomplish.

Commentators who have remarked on these lines have usually focussed on the image of a battle in the coulds, noting similar descriptions in 2 Macc 5,2-4; Josephus, *War* 6.5.3 (288); and Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13²⁾. None, however, have commented on the odd

¹⁾ John J. COLLINS, “Sibylline Oracles”, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. CHARLESWORTH (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1983) 1.354-5 notes that these lines are part of the main corpus of the book and suggests that they were written in Egypt during the period 163-145 BCE.

²⁾ John J. COLLINS, “Sibylline Oracles”, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (OTP), James H. CHARLESWORTH, ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 1.380. Cf. also William J. DEANE, *Pseudepigrapha* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891) 300; J. GEFFCKEN, *Die Oracula Sibyllina* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902) 89; H.C.O. LANZ CHESTER, “The Sibylline Oracles”, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, R.H. CHARLES, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 2.392; H.N. BATE, *The Sibylline Oracles: Books III-V* (London: SPCK, 1918) 81; D.S. RUSSELL, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Piladelphia: Westminster, 1964) 276; John R. BARLETT, *Jews in the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 38. Of these BATE and BARLETT also call attention to Luke 21:10-11. Finally, BATE sees a similarity to the account of the eruption of Vesuvius found in Dio 66.11.

description of that battle as *hoia kynēgesien thērōn* ("a sort of wild beast hunt") in line 806. Such a description does not appear in any of the parallel "battle in the clouds" passages cited by commentators. At first glance it does not seem to be a particularly appropriate designation for that battle. References to a "wild beast hunt" in certain rabbinic texts, however, provide a context in which this designation may be applied to the eschatological battle.

Identification of an eschatological conflict with a hunt occurs in a short passage from the Babylonian Talmud. In *b. B. Bat.* 74b-75a, Rav Dimi³⁾ cites R. Jonathan⁴⁾ concerning a future struggle between the angel Gabriel and the monster Leviathan:

In the future, Gabriel will carry out a hunt (*QNYG*⁵⁾ for Leviathan; for it is said, "You shall draw out Leviathan with a hook and draw down his tongue with a cord" (Job 40,25). But unless the Holy One (blessed be He) helps him, he shall not prevail against him; for it is said, "He who made him will bring his sword near" (Job 40,19).

The text describes the struggle between Gabriel and Leviathan as a hunt, using a hebraization of the Greek *kynēgia*, a synonym of the word *kynēgesia* which is found in *Sib. Or.* 3.806⁵⁾. The citation of Job 40,25 provides the specifics of this *kynēgia*, this hunt. That passage, a rhetorical question in its original setting, is here read as a commission delivered by God to Gabriel. It describes the weapons which Gabriel will use against the creature (a hook and a line or cord). The text goes on to describe Gabriel's failure to accomplish his mission and the subsequent necessity of God's intervention. As evidence of this intervention it cites Job 40,19⁶⁾.

This angelic hunt for Leviathan is a motif which occurs in several other rabbinic texts⁷⁾. Though the word *QNYGY*⁵⁾ does not occur in

³⁾ Dimi of Nehardea, 4 century Babylonian *amora*.

⁴⁾ Jonathan ben Eleazar, early 3 century Palestinian *amora*.

⁵⁾ Henry George LIDELL and Robert SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 1010.

⁶⁾ The writer is apparently untroubled by the fact that this text refers not to Leviathan but to Behemoth.

⁷⁾ *Pesiq. Rab Kah.*, supplement 2 (ed. MANDELBAUM, 455.9-457.8); the *silluq* *WYKWN* 'WLM by Eleazar be-Rabbi Qallir (Jefim SCHIRMANN, "The Battle Between Behemoth and Leviathan according to an ancient Hebrew *Piyyut*", *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 4, 350-359). Cf. also the late work *Midrās 'alpā' bêtōt, w"h d"g* (S.A. WERTHEIMER, *Batei Midrashot*, 2 ed. [Jerusalem: Ktab Wasepher, 1968] 2.437f.); and *midr. Tanhūmā*, *Šemini* 7 (traditional text; ed. ESHKOL [1978] 523).