

Leviathan in Mandaean Literature

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Abstract

The Mandaeans are the only Gnostic group from antiquity that has survived to the present day. Their sacred texts contain various biblical figures, place names and narratives known from the Bible. Among the different biblical characters found in Mandaean literature is Leviathan, who is mentioned in the Old Testament. Using various Jewish and early Christian texts as comparative material, this article explores the possible sources of the Leviathan figure in Mandaean literature. It concludes that the “demonic nature” of Leviathan is primarily based on two Old Testament texts – Psalm 74:14–16 and Isaiah 27:1 – where he appears as a chaos monster, an enemy of God, embodying the open sea. Although Leviathan also appears as an evil being in early Christian tradition, it seems more likely that the figure of Leviathan in Mandaean literature was influenced more by post-Old Testament Jewish than by Christian traditions, and that the portrayal of Leviathan as an evil being is also consistent with Gnostic traditions outside the Mandaean community.

Keywords Bible · Mandaic Religion · Mandaic Mythology · Gnosticism · Leviathan

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The Mandaean, the last surviving Gnostic group from antiquity (Rudolph 1983, 343–366; Drower 1937; DeConick 2020, 13–20; Buckley 2002; Buckley 2005; Lupieri 2001), whose original homeland and time of origin remain subjects of scholarly debate,¹ possess a remarkable religious literature. This literature is difficult to date (Rudolph 1960; Buckley 2002, 10–16; Buckley 2005)² but rich in biblical characters and motifs. Their sacred texts mention figures known from biblical tradition, including Adam and Hawwā (=Eve), Hibil, Šitil, and Anōš

¹ Some early scholars (Mark Lidzbarski (1925, VI–XVII), Rudolf Bultmann (1925) favored a pre-Christian, Palestinian origin. The Danish scholar V. Schou Pedersen (1940) argued that there has to be a Christian stage within the early development of Mandaeanism. According to April DeKonick, the first Mandaeans were “a group of Nazorean Gnostic Christians” led by a woman priest named Miriam. The origin of Mandaeanism points to the very late first century, when, in the southern marshes of the Euphrates, Miriam founded a group of Gnostic Christian Baptists. Her fledgling community was mainly Nazorean Christians from the diaspora, whose families had fled Palestine around the time of Jerusalem’s destruction by the Romans in 70 CE (DeKonick 2017, 332; 2020, 15). After World War II, the view that Mandaeanism has Jewish origins again gained momentum, especially because the Mandaean text *Haran Gawaita* gives the Mandaeans’ own account of their movement from Palestine into Mesopotamia (Macuch 1957; 1965; Rudolph 1969, 228). For the Palestinian origin of the Mandaeans are among others Hans-Martin Schenke (2012, 143; 181–182), Jorunn Buckley (2002, 3–4; 2005, 312), Karl-Wolfgang Tröger (2001, 172), Birger A. Pearson (2007, 314–332) and Sabah Aldihisi (2008, 22–23). Edwin Yamauchi (1973, 140–42), however, thinks that the origins are Babylonian and can be traced to a non-Jewish sect, similar to the Elchasaites, who took their form of Gnosticism to Mesopotamia and blended with a Mesopotamian cult of magic at the end of the second century CE. Eduardo Lupieri and Jiri Gebelt are also for the Babylonian origin of the Mandaeans (Lupieri 2001, 160; 169; Gebelt 2020, 155–174). See about the origins of Mandaeans: Rudolph 1960; Lahe 2012, 374–385; Aldihisi 2008, 15–23.

² It has been established with certainty that today’s collections of Mandaean literature (*Ginza*, *Johannesbuch*, *Qolasta* [= liturgies]) came into existence after the arrival of Islam in Babylonia in the 7th–8th centuries. This is indicated by the allusions to Islam and by the need to justify the Mandaeans’ status before Muslims as “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*). This is probably why the *Ginza* is attributed to Adam and the *Book of Kings* to John (in the Arabic form Yaḥyā), both of whom were Qur’ānic prophets (Rudolph 1960, 23). The oldest Mandaic texts are the liturgies (see Lidzbarski 1962; Drower 1959). By comparing the Coptic-Manichaean *Psalms of Thomas* with Mandaean hymn poetry, Säve-Söderbergh demonstrated that this part of Mandaean literature, which already contains the leading motifs of the Mandaean myth, belongs at least to the third century (Säve-Söderbergh 1949).

(=Abel, Seth, and Enosh) as well as Noah and his sons Šum, Jam, and Jafeth (=Shem, Ham, and Japheth), ³Abraham, and Moses. Geographical names from Palestine – such as Jerusalem, the Jordan, and Mount Carmel – that play important roles in the Old Testament also appear in Mandaean literature. Behind the archdemon Rūhā stands the ruach Elohim of Genesis 1:2; the archdemon's name, Ur (ʿūr), is presumably derived from Genesis 1:3f. (ʿôr = “light”). The Mandaean demiurge Ptahil is clearly endowed with traits of the biblical Creator God, and the common Mandaean designation for the lower, earthly world, “Tibil,” corresponds to the biblical tēbēl (Rudolph 1960, 80–84; Schenke 2012, 182). Many Mandaean creation narratives resemble the Genesis account (Lahe 2012, 219–220; 246), and other stories – Paradise (Lahe 2012, 265), the Flood (Lahe 2012, 301), the Exodus (Lahe 2012, 329), and Moses receiving the law on Sinai (Lahe 2012, 324–325) – have close Old Testament parallels. The structure of Mandaean world history strongly resembles the biblical one (Rudolph 1960, 84). John the Baptist, Jesus, and his mother Mary (Mirjai) also occupy significant places in the Mandaean tradition (Rudolph 1960, 47–49; 66–80; 95–99; DeConick 2017, 326–333). Although Mandaean scriptures demonstrate familiarity with Jewish and Christian writings, they maintain a critical distance. The authors rarely seem to have consulted biblical texts directly, relying instead on hearsay or secondhand versions, which they reframe in unconventional ways (DeConick 2017, 328). In this respect, Mandaean literature resembles the Qurʾān, where biblical characters – including John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus – play key roles, yet no clear evidence proves that Muhammad had access to written biblical texts (Tröger 2004).

Leviathan in Mandaean Sources

Among other historical and mythical biblical figures, Leviathan (Mandaic: Liuiatan) appears in Mandaean literature. Absent from the oldest Mandaean liturgies (*Qolasta*) (see Lidzbarski 1920; Drower

³ The Mandaean community traces its origins back to Shem, whom they regard as the only legitimate son of Noah and his wife. Noah's other three sons, considered illegitimate, are viewed as the ancestors of everyone else in the world (DeConick 2017, 327).

1959), Leviathan is mentioned several times in two major Mandaean scriptures – the *Ginza* (see Lidzbarski 1925) and the *Book of John* (see Häberl, McGrath 2020) – as well as in *The Thousand and Twelve Questions* (Alf Trisar Šuialia, ATŠ) (see Drower 1960). Leviathan is here considered to be identical with the demon named Ur, who is the king of the World of Darkness (*Right Ginza* 15.5). Sometimes Ur and Leviathan are treated as two distinct beings, but they are mentioned together with other underworld creatures (ATŠ I, 33).⁴ Ur is usually depicted as a large and furious dragon or serpent. In Mandaean mythology, he appears in various forms – sometimes as a giant reptile or dragon, other times as a serpent biting its own tail, as depicted on the talisman known as the *skandola* (Aldihisi 2008, 184; see also p. 154, note 520). This is the *ouroboros*,⁵ a symbol of cyclical existence – “the unfolding of the One into the many, and the return of the many into the One” (Leisegang 1985, 111). The image of the *ouroboros* is used both in ancient magic and in the Gnostic tradition – for example, in *Pistis Sophia* (books 3 and 4) and in Epiphanius’s treatment of the ‘libertine Gnostics’ (*Panarion* 26). The *Right Ginza* describes him as a creature with the head of a lion, the body of a dragon, the wings of an eagle, the back of a turtle, and the hands and feet of a monster (GRR 333). Savah Aldihisi points out that this description of the Mandaean King of Darkness coincides with the depiction of the demiurge Ialdabaoth in the *Apocryphon of John*; Ialdabaoth is also said to resemble a lion and a serpent (Aldihisi 2008, 184). This parallel is worth emphasizing, as both Mandaean literature and the *Apocryphon of John* from Nag Hammadi belong to the Gnostic tradition. Both Ur and Ialdabaoth are evil, demonic beings – unlike the *ouroboros*. According to Rudolph, however, there is one significant difference between the Mandaean Ur and the Ialdabaoth of the *Apocryphon of John* – Ialdabaoth is the creator of the material world, whereas Ur is not. In Mandaean tradition, the creator

⁴ There is a long series of such monsters. The forces of the World of Darkness consist of demons, *dewi*’s (evil spirits), *hmurtha*’s (“amulet-spirits”), *lilith*’s, *ṭcuri*’s (“temple-spirits”), *priki*’s (“shrine-spirits”), *patikri*’s (“idol-demons”), *arkoni*’s (“archons”), *malaki*’s (“angels”), *nalai*’s (“vampires”), *niuli*’s (“hobgoblins”), *piga*’s (“misadventure demons”), *pilgi*’s (“mutant demons”), *latabi*’s (“devils”), *lihani*’s (“net-spirits”), *gadulta*’s (“ghosts”), and *satani*’s (“Satans”) – all the hateful forms of darkness of every kind and variety, male and female (Aldihisi 2008, 185).

⁵ See on the *ouroboros* in Egyptian religion Hornung 2005, 189.

of the world is Ptahil, El-Šaddai, El-Rabba, Jorabba, or Adonai (Rudolph 1965). Nevertheless, Ur/Leviathan is also connected to the cosmos in Mandaean belief. Ethel Stefana Drower describes his position in the universe as follows:

“Ur is the mighty Serpent or dragon of the underworld upon whom the material world rests. Above him are the seven material firmaments and below him the underworlds of darkness. He has a fiery breath like a flame, and his belly is alternately fire and ice. Souls too impure to undergo the lighter purifications of Matharatha⁶ are drawn into his belly, and amongst these are unbelievers.”⁷

As the previous quotation shows, Leviathan also plays a role in Mandaean eschatology. He has a role in both individual and collective eschatology. In Book 18 of the *Right Ginza*, it is said that ‘the great Leviathan’ is freed from his bonds. With his gigantic mouth, he devours the “earth of Tibil” along with the planets, zodiacal beings, all demons, and “the souls found guilty in the court of law,” whereupon everyone dies in his body and his stench rises from Tibil. In the *Book of John* (Book 88.11; 99.17), it is said that the sinner “shall find his place in the body of Leviathan.” The threat of “finding a place in the body of Leviathan” is directed, for example, at a man who does not wash after intercourse (*Right Ginza* 300, 6–7; similarly in the *Book of John*, 28:66–67; 67:43–44). The belly of Leviathan is also a place of punishment for those who defile the baptismal water (Drower 1960, 121). Still, it is also the destination for those guilty of other cultic or doctrinal transgressions (Drower 1960, 275).⁸ In ATŠ, Leviathan swallows negligent priests and defilers of sacred rituals: “But those amongst priests and *ganzibra*’s whose actions are unacceptable”, (such as) those priests who recite the prayers for deconsecration) of their crowns in the morning office before they consecrate the

⁶ There are the super-terrestrial penal stations (analogous to Purgatory in the Roman Catholic tradition; see Rudolph 1983, 175–183).

⁷ Quoted according to the translation by E. S. Drower (Drower 2002, 253, note 3).

⁸ See also Drower (1960, 121): “Any man who diluteth the water of prayer will become the portion of Qin, Krun, Leviathan, Šdum, and of ‘Ur, the King of Darkness.”

crown, the great Leviathan will receive them outside; the great Nest of darkness which is the well Sumqaq⁹.” The Thousand and Twelve Questions warns:

“When they perform rites and commit errors in them, so setting up schism, there were some amongst them who cast blame on one another, and who reject the mischievous liturgical rites that have taken root amongst them, rousing their indignation; since they knew, understood and interpreted that which was in the minds of Nasoraeans who had elucidated the mystery and gave out warning. (For) the Father sent them a revelation, that is, a Messenger, one that called them and sent them forth and said to them “Reveal this mystery to them, (show them) this great Commentary, (this) Lamp which enlighteneth darkened hearts. It giveth judgement (decideth) between road and road, boundary and boundary, and path and path for (the benefit of) any Nasoraean man who seeth (consults) this mystery. And thou shalt reveal this warning and explanation in his presence. And should he despise it, increase or deduct from it, eradicate any part of it, make wilful addition to it from his (own) mind; or proceed by violent methods which are earthly to promote enmity, rancour and dark dissensions amongst the priests, and preach that which is not commanded by the (Great) Life – the heavenly Mara-d-Rabutha will curse him, take from him his crown and wreath, his name and his treasure, and he will be hurled down to his appointed place which is the Place of Darkness, and will become the prey of the dragon Leviathan.”¹⁰

In this world, Leviathan is represented in the form of snakes. According to Mandaean beliefs, those attacked by a snake “are marked with the sign of Leviathan and become part of the Darkness” (Drower 1960, 225; 262). The idea that snakes are emissaries of evil recalls a similar notion in Zoroastrianism (Hutter 2015, 480). The Mandaean conception of Leviathan shares many parallels with those found in Iranian, Jewish, and Christian traditions. Next, we will examine the

⁹ Quoted according to the translation by E. S. Drower. The well Sumqaq is a fiery well in the underworld mentioned in the Ginza Rba and elsewhere (see Drower 1960, 113, note 13).

¹⁰ Quoted according to the translation by E. S. Drower.

figure of the Mandaean Leviathan described above in light of these parallels.

Leviathan in the Bible and in the post-biblical pseudepigrapha

Leviathan appears five times in the Hebrew Bible: Job 3:8; 40:25–41:26; Psalm 74:12–19; Psalm 104:25–26; and Isaiah 27:1. His role varies: in Psalms 74 and Isaiah 27:1, he is a chaos monster and an enemy of God; in Psalm 104 and Job 40, a creature of God, either a plaything (Psalm 104) or a manifestation of divine power (Job 40) (Witte 2021, 671). Wilhelm Gesenius argued the name נְתִינָל was derived from the root נוּל “to wind; to join” with an adjectival suffix ל, for a literal meaning of “wreathed, twisted in folds” (Gesenius 1962, 382). Kang thinks that the name “Leviathan” is derived from the base יל “to writhe, curl up” and means “the one who wriggles” (Kang 2017, 172). Vicchio derives it from the Semitic root תול, related to the verb “to twist” or “to coil” (Vicchio 2020, 279). Another possible meaning is “to follow, surround” or as an adjective, “the wreath-like”, or “the circular”, which would connect with חִירֵב שָׁחַן, “fleeing serpent”, used in parallel with Leviathan in Isa 27:1, so that “its tail is perpetually fleeing... from its own biting mouth.” According to Gesenius, Leviathan is in Isa 27:1, Ps 74:14; 104:23 and in Job 3:8 “serpent”, but in Job 40:25 “crocodile” (Gesenius 1962: 382).¹¹ Also, Keel and many other scholars have identified Leviathan with the crocodile. Like the hippo, Keel believes the crocodile to be a chaos animal which, by hunting in ancient Egypt, ritually restored world order. Leviathan is a water animal (Keel 1978). A few details should be noted here that appear only in the Greek translation of the *Book of Job* (LXX) yet play an important role in the book’s reception history. In Job 40:25 (also in Isa 27:1) “Leviathan” is translated as δράκων. This is the reason why Leviathan is depicted as a dragon in post-biblical times. Leviathan’s identification with the dragon influenced Leviathan’s demonization. In Job 3:8, “Leviathan” is translated as κῆτος. κῆτος is also used to describe the great “fish” in Jonah 2:1 (LXX). From this word we get the modern scientific term, cetology, the study of whales and their kin (Sneed 2022, 51), but in Greek Mythology, κῆτος is a huge sea monster. Perseus slew

¹¹ The hypothesis that Leviathan in Job 40:15–24 is a crocodile originated with G. R. Driver and has found many supporters (Witte 2021, 657).

it to save Andromeda from being sacrificed to it (Apollodorus, *The Library* II.4.3). The Leviathan has a rich afterlife in Jewish and Christian literature. In the post-biblical pseudepigrapha, Leviathan appears in 4 Ezra 6:49–52, 2 Baruch 29:4, and 1 Enoch 60:7–10 (alongside Behemoth). He also appears in *The Apocalypse of Abraham* (10:10 and 21:4) and in *The Ladder of Jacob* (6:13, long recension). According to Whitney, these texts represent two traditions: (1) the “Combat-Banquet tradition,” in which Leviathan and Behemoth are slain and served at a banquet for the righteous; and (2) a cosmological tradition, associating Leviathan with the axis mundi (Whitney 2006, 31).

The idea of God’s battle with the chaos-monster Leviathan originates from Isaiah 27:1, where it is said that God will slay it with the sword. The motif of a god battling a chaos monster identified with the primeval sea is found in many traditions of the ancient Near East. This motif is closely paralleled in the *Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, particularly in KTU 1.5 I 1–3, where the storm god Baal engages in combat with the sea deity Yamm, who represents the chaotic primeval waters. In this myth, Yamm is defeated and cast down by Baal using weapons provided by the craftsman god Kothar-wa-Khasis. The imagery of divine conflict with a sea-monster-like embodiment of chaos in this text strongly anticipates the portrayal in Isaiah 27:1, suggesting a shared mythological background in which the victory of the divine order over chaos is enacted through martial imagery (Wyatt 2002, 399). A similar mythological pattern appears in the Babylonian and Assyrian traditions, particularly in the Enuma Elish, where the god Marduk confronts and defeats the primordial sea goddess Tiamat, who personifies the forces of chaos. Marduk’s triumph involves the use of powerful, divinely crafted weapons and culminates in the splitting of Tiamat’s body to create the ordered cosmos. This cosmic battle, in which chaos is embodied as a monstrous sea entity subdued by divine might, resonates strongly with the imagery in Isaiah 27:1 and reflects a broader ancient Near Eastern motif of divine kingship legitimized through combat against chaos. In Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, this imagery is further politicized, with kings presenting themselves as agents of cosmic order who defeat monstrous or chaotic enemies in the likeness of Marduk’s victory over Tiamat (Annus 2016, 58–60). Such traditions underline the continuity and adaptation of the chaoskampf motif across different cultural and theological settings in the ancient Near East. The notion of Leviathan’s flesh being served at the messianic banquet can be derived from Psalm 74:14a, where it is

stated that God gives Leviathan's flesh as food. It is not entirely clear to whom it is given. Two translation and interpretation traditions compete here – according to one, it is given to “seafarers”; according to the other, to “desert dwellers” (Tate 1990, 243–244). However, in pseudepigraphical Jewish literature, the flesh of Leviathan becomes the food served at the table of the righteous in the Messianic Kingdom.

Leviathan in Christian tradition

As in Jewish pseudepigraphical literature, the figure of Leviathan also appears in Christian tradition. Scholars are convinced that the figure of the seven-headed beast that rises out of the sea, as described in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 13:1–3), is inspired by Leviathan, whose connection to the sea is intrinsic – he is both a creature of the sea and the embodiment of the chaotic deep. The seven heads of the beast described in Revelation 13:1 and onward are also a clear reference to the seven-headed Leviathan mentioned in Isaiah 27:1. The dragon who pursues the messianic child and his mother in the Book of Revelation (Rev 12:13–16), and who spews water from his mouth to drown them, is also thought to be inspired by Leviathan. Both the beast that comes from the sea and the described dragon are evil, God-opposing creatures: the former receives its power from the dragon (Rev 13:1), who throughout the Book of Revelation is identified with Satan. The latter, the dragon, is explicitly referred to as ‘the devil and Satan’ (Rev 12:9). At the end of time, God passes judgment on the first beast, who is cast into the lake of fire and sulfur (Rev 20:10). God's battle with the dragon, which takes place through the archangel Michael and his angels, is described as occurring already before the end-time events (Rev 12:7 ff.). It is evident that this motif is rooted in Old Testament texts that speak of God's struggle with Leviathan (Ps 74; Isa 27:1). The motif of a waterfall gushing from the mouth of a dragon (Rev 12:13 ff.) is inspired by the depiction of Leviathan in Jewish tradition, found in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Baba Batra*, where it is said that the Jordan River originates in the caves of Paneas, flows through the lakes of Sibkay and Tiberias, and continues into the great sea, from where it proceeds until it bursts into the mouth of the Leviathan” (b. *Baba Batra* 74b). The original source of the motif is likely Job 40:23, where it is said of Behemoth that the river flows into its mouth. In this case, however,

the motif – originally associated with another mythological creature, Behemoth – has simply been transferred to a dragon and modified: the river does not flow into the dragon’s mouth, but instead gushes out of it. The connection between the dragon (=Leviathan) and water is evident in all of these traditions, as it is with the beast described in Revelation 13:1 and onward, which rises out of the sea, but according to Holtz’s interpretation, the Book of Revelation does not construct a closed or coherent myth, but rather employs metaphors drawn from earlier mythological traditions to express and interpret its own historically and experientially grounded reality. The descriptions of the beasts thus merge biblical, mythological, and historical elements, forming hybrid, difficult-to-define figures. It is precisely this indefinability and elusiveness to the imagination that gives them a powerful numinous and threatening dimension (Holtz 2008, 96–97). Origen (185–254 CE) appears to identify Leviathan with the dragon, which he interprets as a symbol of Satan. Commenting on LXX Job 40:14 (= MT Job 40:19) (“This is the beginning of the Lord’s creation, made to be mocked by his angels”) and connecting it to John 1:1, Origen argues that Satan was the first bodily being created by God (Sneed 2022, 98). He claims that the dragon, more than any other, deserved to be bound to matter and the body, since he had “fallen from a pure life” (Origen 1989, 53). Heine notes that this reflects the idea of Satan’s fall from heaven – the original departure of souls from God, in which the devil fell the farthest. Possibly responding to contemporary theories claiming the devil to be uncreated by nature, Origen interprets this verse as “a description of the devil’s fall prior to creation from an immaterial existence, which made inevitable the formation of the first physical body – a body that was then mocked by the angels...” (Sneed 2022, 98–99). Origen is also one of the first Christian authors to identify Behemoth and Leviathan with heretics. They symbolize Marcion and the Gnostic “heretics” Basilides and Valentinus (Simonetti and Conti 2006, 215–216; Sneed 2022, 117). This serves as a clear example of how demonic figures from the Bible were employed in anti-heretical polemics. Yet Leviathan also appears in Origen’s writings in connection with Christ. He interpreted Job 3:8b (“those who are prepared to tame the great sea creature”) as a reference to Christ. Origen identified the sea creature with death, which swallows Christ, yet Christ ultimately defeats it. He understood the taming of Leviathan in Job 40:24–25 as representing Christ’s victory over the devil, whom he called a “rebel” or “fugitive.” This reflects the

LXX translation of Job 26:13, where the “twisting serpent” or “fleeing serpent” is rendered as the “rebellious dragon,” with the addition of the word “rebellious” (ἁποστάτης) in the Greek text (Sneed 2022, 107). Like Origen, both Gregory of Nyssa (335–395) and the presbyter Philip (5th century) identified Leviathan with the devil and saw in Leviathan’s defeat the victory of Christ over Satan (Sneed 2022: 108–109). In contrast, Cyril of Jerusalem (315–387) understood Leviathan’s death symbolically. In order to eliminate this threat, Jesus descended into the Jordan, entering the mouth of the monster – death – and overcame it by swallowing up death. In the same way, Christians participate in the defeat of this monster through baptism (Catechetical Lectures, 3.11–12). Cyril’s statement that Christ entered the mouth of death, identified with Leviathan, points to a fascinating tradition complex with roots in Jewish pseudepigraphical literature, where Leviathan’s belly is equated with hell (= the realm of death) (3 Baruch, see above). In this way, Jesus’ descent into the grave – and more specifically, into the realm of the dead – is grounded in a tradition reflected in the New Testament, particularly in 1 Peter 3:19–23, which states that during his death, Jesus was in the underworld and preached the gospel to the dead. In Matthew 12:40 it is said: “...for just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.” Here, Jesus’ grave or the realm of the dead (Greek *hades*), where he resided before his resurrection and, according to 1 Peter 3, preached to the dead, is equated with the belly of the sea monster in which the prophet Jonah spent three days. As noted above, it is significant that in the Septuagint, the word used for the sea monster that swallowed Jonah (Jonah 2:1) is *kētos* – the same term used in Job 3:8 to translate the name “Leviathan.” From this emerges a complex of motifs connecting death, the grave, the underworld, and the experience of being inside the belly of a monster – a theme to which we shall soon return.

Leviathan in the Gnostic Tradition

In addition to Jewish pseudepigraphical and Christian literature, Leviathan also appears in Gnostic tradition. Thus, Origen describes a Gnostic model of the world known as the “Ophite diagram” (Origenes, *Contra Celsum* VI, 24–38), in which one of the cosmic spheres is designated by

the name “Leviathan.” In this context, Leviathan does not appear as an evil being – instead, the motif reflects the cosmological function attributed to Leviathan in pseudepigraphical literature: Leviathan as a guarantor of cosmic order. In contrast, in the book *Baruch* by the Gnostic Justins, as described by Hippolytus (Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V 24–27. See, e.g., Van den Broek 2013, 157–158), Leviathan is portrayed as an evil serpent. In Manichaean tradition, Leviathan is simply a sea monster dwelling in the great ocean (Tardieu 2008, 46). Thus, in Gnostic tradition, Leviathan appears in various roles and functions – it is by no means always a representative of the forces of evil. In Mandaean traditions, Leviathan appears in the same role as in Psalm 74 and Isaiah 27:1 – as a chaos monster and adversary of God. In Mandaean Gnostic mythology, he is the embodiment of darkness and evil, opposed to the divine world of light and its ruler. Many motifs from Mandaean mythology associated with the figure of Leviathan also find numerous parallels in Jewish pseudepigraphical and early Christian literature. The idea of Leviathan being released from chains, for example, recalls Revelation 20:1–3, but also has analogues in Iranian religious thought. In Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition, the eschatological monster Aži Dahāka (Azhdahāk) is said to be chained on Mount Damāvand by the hero Thraētaona (Ferēdūn). Although subdued in primeval times, Aži Dahāka is not killed but imprisoned, and Zoroastrian texts predict his eventual release at the end of the current cosmic cycle, when he will rise again to bring destruction before being finally defeated (Skjaervø 1987a, 313–314; Skjaervø 1987b). The notion that Leviathan swallows the whole world is clearly rooted in the idea of Leviathan’s insatiable hunger and thirst, a theme prominent in Jewish tradition (Whitney 2006, 93). This scene exemplifies a widely attested international folklore motif involving a gigantic beast that devours the entire world.¹² The belief that demons and the souls of the wicked dwell within Leviathan’s body undoubtedly stems from the association of Leviathan’s belly with the underworld. Even the Christian interpretation of the Jonah story (Mat 12:40) is likely connected to this concept. This idea is paralleled in the *Book of Baruch* (5:1–13), where Leviathan’s belly is equated with

¹² This motif appears in Stith Thompson’s catalogue under the entry “World devoured by ogre” and is classified as A1099 (Thompson 2016, A1099. Accessed April 18, 2025. https://ia600301.us.archive.org/18/items/Thompson2016MotifIndex/Thompson_2016_Motif-Index.pdf).

Hades, and in Cyril of Jerusalem's interpretation, in which Leviathan symbolizes death. Here we encounter the previously discussed complex of motifs that connects death, the grave, the underworld, and the experience of dwelling within the belly of a monster. While individual elements of this motif can be found in the folklore of various cultures,¹³ its specific form as it appears in *3 Baruch*, as well as in Christian and Mandaean traditions, is unique. It is unlikely that the Mandaeans had access to the New Testament or later early Christian writings in written form. However, due to their geographical location in Iraq and Iran, they were exposed to the influence of Persian religion (Zoroastrianism), and, as noted at the beginning of this article, they were also strongly influenced by the Old Testament and Jewish traditions. These influences should also be taken into account when considering the figure of Leviathan in Mandaean literature.

Conclusion

Based on the texts discussed above, the following conclusions can be made about the figure of Leviathan in Mandaean literature: in Mandaean literature, there are no traditions in which the figure of Leviathan is viewed neutrally – he is always an evil being, closely associated with the king of darkness, Ur, and is often identified with him. The figure of Leviathan in Mandaean literature has certainly been influenced by Psalm 24:17–19 and Isaiah 27:1, where he appears as a chaos monster who is the enemy of God and embodies the open sea. However, it cannot be proven that the Mandaeans were familiar with the Old Testament

¹³ Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* includes several motifs involving the swallowing of living beings by large animals. However, there is no direct motif in which the realm of the dead is identified with the belly of a giant creature, or where death is equated with being inside such a belly. Relevant motifs include, for example, A535 – a culture hero is swallowed and escapes from the belly of the animal. Stories of this type are found in Irish mythology, among others, but they do not explicitly associate the animal's belly with the realm of the dead. Another relevant motif is C929.5 – death by swallowing as punishment for a taboo violation. In this motif, a person is punished for violating a taboo by being swallowed. Such a story appears in Rarotongan mythology, but here too the belly of the creature is not directly equated with the world of the dead (Accessed April 18, 2025. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Motif-Index_of_Folk-Literature/Volume_1/C/900).

in written form. Although the demonic features of the Mandaean Leviathan also appear in Christian tradition, it seems that the figure of Leviathan in Mandaean literature has been influenced more by post-Old Testament Jewish traditions than by Christian ones. In addition to what has been said above, the figure of Leviathan in Mandaean mythology also overlaps with the Leviathan found in the Gnostic work *Baruch* by Justin (Hippolytos, Ref. V 24–27), where he appears as a representative of the forces of evil. While several motifs characteristic of the Mandaean Leviathan are absent from this text (such as Leviathan devouring the world or his belly functioning as a place of punishment), in both *Baruch* and Mandaean tradition, Leviathan is portrayed as a malevolent being. As previously mentioned, portraying Leviathan as an evil being is not characteristic of the entire Gnostic tradition but represents one of the many variants of its depiction. Even in this form, Leviathan's figure remains connected to Jewish pseudepigraphical literature and Old Testament traditions, which depict Leviathan as a chaos monster and an enemy of God. The Old Testament/Jewish origin of the Mandaean Leviathan aligns well with the earlier observation regarding the significant presence of Old Testament and Jewish traditions in Mandaean literature. Since there is no evidence suggesting that these traditions entered Mandaean literature through a Christian filter, this serves as an argument for many scholars supporting the hypothesis that the roots of Mandaism (as well as Gnosticism as a whole) should be sought in certain Jewish circles (see, e.g., Lidzbarski 1928, 321–327; Macuch 1977, 452–467; Rudolph 1960; Rudolph 2005: 379–394; Schenke 1965, 129–130; Schenke 2012, 160–187; Tröger 2001, 172; Buckley 2005, 339–341, cf. note 2).

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