

Behemoth's Penis, Yahweh's Might: Competing Bodies in the Book of Job

Introduction

Job 40-41 describe two great beasts: Leviathan and Behemoth. While the domain of the Leviathan was in the seas,¹ Behemoth was a creature of both land and water.² Together, the pairing dominate the world³ – until the God of Israel steps in and subdues them. But the nature of Behemoth in particular is difficult to unpack. Unlike the Leviathan, who is attested as a primordial sea monster elsewhere in biblical literature as well as in Ugaritic texts,⁴ Behemoth is found only here in the Hebrew Bible. Because of this, some scholars argue that the creature was an invention of the author of the book of Job (e.g. Habel, 1985: 559). Nevertheless, there are clear connections to mythopoetic traditions elsewhere in the Hebrew

¹ Job 41:7.

² Job 40:20-21, 23.

³ While this is the most obvious interpretation of the pairing in Job 40-41, it is not universally accepted that these chapters refer to two separate monsters. Unlike Leviathan, Job 40:15 contains the only explicit reference to Behemoth in the Hebrew Bible, although other possible references include Deut 32:34; Isa 30:6; Job 12:7; and Ps 73:22, where *bēhēmôt* may refer either to the plural of *bēhēmā* (so “beasts,” or “livestock”), or to the Joban creature. See e.g., Gordis (1943); and Wolfers (1990). Nevertheless, these references are speculative rather than certain, and have been disputed by Batto (1999: 165, 168). Some scholars have connected Behemoth to the mysterious entity *ʾtk* who appears in the Baal epic alongside several other monsters defeated by the goddess Anat (KTU³ 1.3). However this identification has no etymological basis and, as Madadh Richey (2018) has shown, *ʾtk* has more connections to Sumerian traditions about “bound bulls.” Because Behemoth is therefore unique to these chapters in the book of Job, Naftali Tur-Sinai (1967: 556-559) argues that Job 40-41 refers only to the Leviathan, with *bēhēmôt* in Job 40:15 not referring to a second monster but simply the plural form of *bēhēmā*, “beasts,” and so a description of animals more generally. However, the verbal forms applied to this *bēhēmôt* are all masculine *singular*, suggesting that the form is from the intensive plural of *bēhēmā*, with an augmentative meaning, and so referring to a “great beast.” On the etymology of *bēhēmôt*, see Botterweck (1975). Job 40:15 therefore cannot refer to “animals” more generally, but rather to a second monstrous creature.

⁴ Leviathan, Biblical Hebrew *liwyātān*, is attested in Ugaritic literature as *ltn* (KTU³ 1.5 i:1 27) and six times in the Hebrew Bible, albeit exclusively in poetic texts (Isa 27:1 [x2]; Pss 74:14; 104:26; Job 3:8; 26:3; 40:25). On the Leviathan in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, see Uehlinger (1999); and Korpel and de Moor (2017).

Bible and Northwest Semitic literature, in which the chief deity engages in battle with a sea creature,⁵ and the most obvious interpretation is therefore to take the pairing as primordial monsters. On the other hand, many scholars undercut the mythological aspects of the tradition and instead argue that Behemoth refers to a more mundane creature, usually a hippopotamus, crocodile, or a water buffalo.⁶

In this context, the description of Behemoth in vv. 15-18 is crucial for interpreting the nature of the beast. According to the New Revised Standard Version, these verses should be translated as follows:

Look at Behemoth,
which I made just as I made you;
it eats grass like an ox.
Its strength is in its loins,
and its power in the muscles of its belly.
It makes its tail stiff like a cedar;
the sinews of its thighs are knit together.
Its bones are tubes of bronze,
its limbs like bars of iron (40:15-18).

But depending upon the particular viewpoint of the scholar, this rather obscure description can be made to conform to either interpretation. Thus for Brian Doak (2015: 278), “[n]othing about the Behemoth (40:15-24) needs to be read as particularly non-realistic for a biological animal.” On the other hand, while Michael Fox (2012: 261) interprets this description as referring to a hippopotamus, he nevertheless notes that this reference to the beast’s “tail” is

⁵ See especially Wakeman (1972: 106-117); Pope (1973: 320-322); and Day (1985: 80-84).

⁶ In this context, scholars have suggested a possibly etymology for Behemoth via an Egyptian loanword, **p²-iḥ-hw*, “the ox of the water.” Yet as Bernard Batto (1999: 166) has shown, no such term existed in either Egyptian or Coptic. Nevertheless, this identification persists in the secondary literature. See e.g., Driver (1956: 234-249); Ruprecht (1971: 209-231); Keel (1978: 127-156); Kubina (1979: 68-75); Couroyer (1987: 214-222); Clines (2011: 148-157); Fox (2012); Doak (2014: 218-26; 2015: 280); cf. the NEB translation. Perhaps because of the difficulty in interpreting the nature of the beast, there was a great deal of speculation about Behemoth in ancient Jewish and Christian literature. For a concise overview of this, see Breed (2012).

surprising given that the tail of the hippopotamus is actually rather short, “at about 45 cm.” In fact, the focus on these verses as providing a comprehensive description of either a mundane animal or mythic monster obscures other aspects of the description that are crucial for understanding the implications and intentions of the text. These verses can be interpreted as a *wasf*, a literary technique known elsewhere in biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature for describing the body. But rather than a straight-forward example of this technique, the poet transforms the *wasf* in order to say something specific about the nature of the creature. In this essay, I will begin by connecting Behemoth’s body description to the *wasf*, drawing on the work of Jacqueline Vayntrub (2020a) to show how ancient authors could playfully rework this technique in order to emphasize certain aspects of their subject’s body and character. Returning to Job 40:15-18, I will argue that these verses be understood as a transformed *wasf*, with implications for understanding Behemoth as well as the function of the body description in Job 40 as a whole.

The Poetics of the Body in the Hebrew Bible

A number of texts from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature utilize head-to-toe description in order to characterize and define the human body. This poetic strategy is commonly described in the secondary literature as the *wasf*, which takes its name from a genre of Arabic love poetry that similarly provides a thick description of the body.⁷ In a *wasf*, body parts are listed and described according to an organising principle that develops its contents from head to toe. In ancient Near Eastern literature, a genre of texts known as the *Göttertypentexte* describe divine cult statues following this principle.⁸ In fact, a variety of Sumerian and Akkadian literary genres favour head-to-toe organization for systematic descriptions of the body, both divine and human.⁹ The best-known examples from biblical literature occur in the Song of Songs, while other lists of body parts can be found in the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.¹⁰ Thus Song 5 describes the male lover’s body, starting with his head and its various features:

⁷ See already Hermann (1963). On the Arabic genre, see Sumi (2004).

⁸ On the *Göttertypentexte*, see Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 125-127).

⁹ For examples, see Couto-Ferreira (2017).

¹⁰ Song 4:1-7; 5:11-16; 6:4-7; 7:2-10; Pss 115:5-7; 135:16-17; Prov 6:12-15, 17; Dan 2:32-33; Isa 32:3-6; and Ezek 1:5-13, 26-28. See Watson (2005: 353-356).

His **head** is like the most-pure gold.

His **hair** is curly-black like a raven.

His **eyes** are like doves by streams of water,
washed in milk, mounted like jewels.

His **cheeks** are like garden beds full of balsam trees yielding perfume.

His **lips** are like lilies dripping with drops of myrrh.

His **arms** are like rods of gold set with chrysolite.

His **abdomen** is like polished ivory inlaid with sapphires.

His **legs** are like pillars of marble set on bases of pure gold (vv. 11-14).

All of these body parts are couched using metaphors that makes use of stone and metal imagery reminiscent of a description of a statue, akin to the *Göttertypentexte* that describe divine cult statues in the ancient Near East. Indeed, it has been suggested that the biblical *awāṣf* may have developed from these earlier descriptions of divine statuary (Watson, 2005: 353-356).

This downward movement is not always truly linear. The poet might also choose to highlight a particular aspect of the body by presenting it out of order, for example in Song 5, where the poet interrupts his downward movement with an out-of-place body part: the lover's mouth. This rhetorical strategy allows the poet to connect the lover and his body to conceptions of sweetness, taste, and the desires of the appetite: the lover's mouth is described as *mamtaqqîm*, with the plural form of the noun *meteq*, "sweetness," functioning as a predicate nominative relative to the singular subjective nominative ("his mouth"), and thus as a plural of intensity: "his mouth is *very* sweet." By highlighting aspects of taste and sweetness through the focus on the lover's mouth, the poet can conclude of the lover's body as a whole that "he is totally *desirable*." Indeed, a concluding statement summing up the total physical perfection of the described body is typical of the biblical *awāṣf*, and similarly following the description of the Beloved's body Song 4 declares: "*all of you* is beautiful." A *wasf* thus provides a detailed account of the subject's body in order to manifest its aesthetic value and, as Jacqueline Vayntrub has argued (2020b: 222-225), by extending its account systematically from head to toe it therefore makes a claim at totality. It is consequently a particularly affective technique for persuading the reader of the beauty and complete perfection of the subject.

A similar strategy in which the order and focus of the body description has a rhetorical function can be found in the description of the Capable Wife in Proverbs 31. In

fact, this poem has also been interpreted as *wasf* by David Bernat (2004: 341-347), but he thinks that this is a particular sort of *wasf* which he calls the “anti-*wasf*,” the use of the *wasf* to polemicize against beauty rather than to praise it: thus the poem concludes that “charm is deceitful, and beauty is fleeting.” While it is certainly the case therefore that this poem develops a critique of beauty, it is very difficult to agree that it does so by making use of the conventional structure of the *wasf*. When compared to other examples of the *wasf*, the poem describing the Capable Wife is strangely truncated:

Who can find a Capable Wife?
 For her value is far more than rubies [...]
 She obtains wool and flax,
 and she is pleased to work with her **palms**.
 She is like the merchant ships;
 she brings her food from afar.
 She also gets up while it is still night,
 and provides food for her household and a portion to her female servants.
 She considers a field and buys it;
 with the fruit of her **palms** she plants a vineyard.
 She begins her work vigorously,
 and she strengthens her **arms**.
 She knows that her merchandise is good,
 and her lamp does not go out in the night.
 Her **hands** take hold of the distaff,
 and her **palms** grasp the spindle.
 She extends her **palm** to the poor,
 and reaches out her **hand** to the needy.
 She is not afraid of the snow for her household,
 for all of her household are clothed with scarlet [...].
 Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting,
 but a woman who fears the LORD will be praised.
 Give her from the fruit of her **hands**,
 and let her works praise her in the city gates (vv. 10-31).

Rather than providing a list of the parts of the woman's body moving from head to toe, the poem instead focuses only upon certain body parts, explicitly resisting a top-to-toe description: the poem highlights the woman's hands, arms, and palms.

This has led Jacqueline Vayntrub (2020a) to observe that rather than focussing on the *passive* beauty of the Capable Wife as would a *wasf*, the poem instead highlights her *actions* through the focus on her hands. Vayntrub therefore interprets Proverbs 31 as a play on the very rhetorical device which demonstrates beauty, the *wasf*, in order to develop a critique of innate beauty in favour of active deeds. The *wasf* is transformed from a visually-driven, physically-framed and top-to-toe representation, to a more dynamic representation that narrows the physical field to the hands and arms. In so doing, Proverbs 31 shifts the poetic technique of the *wasf* from representations of passivity (of being-viewed) to those of activity (of giving, putting, making, and ultimately reward-receiving). This shift can thus be understood as a literary strategy which we might call a *transformed wasf*, focusing only upon certain aspects of the body in order to highlight the various associations and activities that come along with them and so in this case, demonstrating the woman's skill and agency. Thus the poem can conclude: "charm is deceitful, and beauty is fleeting." Vayntrub (2020a: 51) therefore argues that "[t]he poem upends the expectations of descriptive poems in order to advance an argument against passive, inborn beauty." Wisdom, acquired and demonstrated through correct action, is preferable to beauty, since beauty is an innate quality which requires no skill or agency to achieve – and this makes perfect sense in the context of the book of Proverbs, which is a book about the *acquisition* of wisdom, after all.

The Poetics of the Body in Job 40

If we return to the description of Behemoth in Job 40, at first glance this too seems to develop a systematic description of the creature, listing and describing various aspects of a body and utilizing parallelism as well as simile and metaphor, just like the other examples of the biblical *awāsf* known from the Song of Songs – and in fact this text has been explicitly interpreted as a *wasf* by Bernat (2004:334-346).¹¹ But like the description of the Capable Wife, rather than providing a systematic and head-to-toe description of the creature's body, the body description here is similarly truncated – the poet seems to circle around and so

¹¹ Bernat calls this an "enemy-*wasf*," citing the description of the Leviathan in Job 40:6-16 as well as Goliath in 1 Sam 17:4-7 as examples of the use of the *wasf* to characterize Israel's enemies.

highlight the middle regions of Behemoth's body. In fact, we can translate and interpret all these bodily references as relating to *one* body part in particular:

Look now at Behemoth,
 which I made as I made you:
 he eats grass like the ox.
 Look at his strength in his **balls**,
 and his power in the muscles of his **penis**.
 He makes his **penis** stiff like a cedar,
 the sinews of his **balls** are tightly wound.
 His **balls** are tubes of bronze,
 His **balls** like bars of iron (vv. 15-18).

Thus in v. 16 we learn that the “strength” of the beast is in its “loins.” Here the noun *motnayim* refers to the “loins,” the part of the body between the ribs and hip bones. It can therefore be used euphemistically to refer to the region of the sexual organs.¹² Roland Boer (2011: 43) suggests that, since *motnayim* is a dual form, it specifically refers to the testicles.¹³ The next body part referred to is the creature's *beten*, usually translated as “belly.” However, this too can have connotations of the genitalia since the most common use of the term is as a reference to the reproductive organs and hence it is often translated as “womb” when describing a female referent.¹⁴ In fact, in the Assur Medical Catalogue, urinary and kidney complaints are conflated. Strahil Panayotov (2018) therefore argues that this convergence suggests “a multi-layered approach to kidneys [and innards] which includes the penis and testicles.” The penis and testes are therefore conflated with the guts and innards in ancient

¹² This is how it is used in Rehoboam's speech in 1 Kgs 12:10, which we will go on to look at in more detail below.

¹³ Thus Deut 33:11 and Sir 30:12 describe crushed “loins,” referring to crushed testicles.

¹⁴ Gen 25:23-24; 30:2; 38:27; Num 5:21-22, 27; Deut 7:13; 28:4, 11, 18, 53; 30:9; Judg 13:5, 7; 16:17; Isa 13:18; 44:2, 24; 46:3; 48:8; 49:1, 5, 15; Jer 1:5; Hos 9:11, 16; 12:3; Mic 6:7; Pss 17:14; 22:9-10; 31:10; 58:4; 71:6; 127:3; 132:11; 139:13; Job 1:21; 3:10; 10:19; 31:15, 18; 38:29; Prov 31:2; Qoh 5:14; 11:5. In Song 7:3, the woman's belly is described “like a mound of wheat.” In this case, the metaphor of a belly “like a mound of wheat” could refer to pubic hair; certainly, spring grass functions this way in Mesopotamian literature. See Jacobsen (1976: 45).

Near Eastern texts.¹⁵ This euphemistic interpretation of *motnayim* and *beṭen* in v. 16 is strengthened through the description of *beṭen* by the noun *ʾōn*, “strength,” which is used in a number of places in biblical literature to refer to the strength to procreate.¹⁶ Specifically, the colon declares that the *šārîr* of the creature will be strengthened. This term is a hapax, but is usually interpreted as referring to the creature’s “sinew” or “muscle” (*BDB* 1057a). The term is likely related to the bi-consonantal noun *šōr*, which occurs with the meaning “navel, umbilical cord” in several texts.¹⁷ This seems to be the interpretation of the LXX, which translates this verse as “its strength is in the navel (*omphalos*) of its belly.” This is particularly intriguing in light of the phallic implications drawn here. The hapax *šōrer* in Song 7:3 is often related to the term *šōr*; alternatively, Marvin Pope (1977: 617) has connected the term to an Arabic lexeme meaning “secret place, pudenda, fornication,” suggesting that the woman’s vulva is in sight. By describing her vulva as a body which never lacks wine, the speaker evokes the Beloved’s sexual fluids or his own semen. However, even if we take *šōrer* as “navel,” it could be suggested that this term is functioning in Song 7:3 as a synecdoche of the woman’s lower region as a whole, and hence euphemistically to her genitalia. The navel is therefore another body part which can be used to refer to the genitals.¹⁸

Verse 17 goes on to describe how the beast “makes its tail stiff like a cedar.” The term *zānāb* occurs with the meaning “tail” in a number of biblical texts.¹⁹ Yet the phallic connotations are again obvious through its description, where the hapax verbal form *yahpōš* likely means “to make stiff” in light of the Arabic cognate *ḥaṣīf* (Bernat, 2004: 336). This is supported by the Greek translation, which provides the verb *histēmi*, “to erect.” This stiffened “tail” therefore presents a serious problem to the view that the animal is a hippopotamus, and even Robert Alter (2010: 170 n. 1), who favours this interpretation, suggests that “the exiguous tail of the hippopotamus scarcely fits the bill... in all likelihood, ‘tail’ is a

¹⁵ For the wider conflation of diseases of the guts and innards with diseases affecting the penis, see Geller and Cohen (1995).

¹⁶ Gen 49:3; Deut 21:17; Pss 78:51; 105:36. In Isa 40:26, the term is used in the context of God’s creative work. In Gen 49:3, the term is used in parallel to *kōah*, “strength,” as here in Job 40:16.

¹⁷ Prov 3:8; Ezek 16:4.

¹⁸ See also Wolfers (1995: 167-168).

¹⁹ Exod 4:4; Deut 28:13, 44; Judg 15:4; Isa 7:4; 9:13-14; 19:15.

euphemism for a different part of the male animal's anatomy."²⁰ In fact, Bernat (2004: 336) suggests a possible double entendre here for *ḥāpāš* with the verb *ḥāpēš*, "to delight, desire." This verb is frequently found with a sexual connotation.²¹ It is therefore likely Behemoth's penis which stiffens here.²² Similarly, the next body part described, the creature's *paḥad*, can be interpreted as a reference to its testes. This hapax is usually construed as referring to the thighs, again based on an Arabic cognate.²³ But in the Vulgate, this is taken to refer to the creature's testicles,²⁴ and this is also the case in the Aramaic Targum to Job. Consequently, a number of commentators interpret this term as "testes" (Greenstein, 2020: 178; Alter 2019: 169-170). In fact, the more common term for "thigh" in Biblical Hebrew, *yārēk*, can be employed with the meaning of genitalia for both men and women.²⁵ So even if we interpret *paḥad* here as an alternative term for the thighs, this may still function as a euphemism for the creature's genitalia, perhaps specifically his testes if we are to take seriously some of the manuscript traditions which render the term in the dual form.²⁶

In v. 18, we learn that the creature's *ʿešem* are like "tubes of bronze."²⁷ The term *ʿešem* usually means "bone." The cola would therefore seem to describe the creature's

²⁰ On "tail" as a euphemism for penis, see Gordis (1978: 447); Pope (1973: 325); Habel (1985: 566); and Greenstein (2020: 178); cf. HALOT 274, which suggests "phallus" as a possible meaning for *zānāb*.

²¹ In Gen 34:19, it describes the desire of Shechem for Dinah; in Deut 21:14, it describes the feelings of an Israelite male to the female prisoner of war if he desires to marry her. Similarly, it is found in conjugal contexts in Deut 25:7-8; Isa 62:4; and Ruth 3:13.

²² And certainly *zānāb* is attested in post-biblical Hebrew with the meaning "penis."

²³ See HALAT III, 872; Pope (1973: 272); Tur-Sinai (1967: 560). In fact, Arabic *afḥādh* can mean both "thighs" and "testicles." See Gordis (1978: 476-477).

²⁴ The Vulgate reads this verse: *constringit caudam suam quasi cedrum nervi testiculorum eius perplexi sunt* (Iob 40:12).

²⁵ Gen 24:2, 9; 49:29; Exod 1:5; 28:42; Num 5:22, 27. On *yārēk* as "penis" in the examples from Genesis, where the term occurs as part of an oath swearing ceremony, see Kozlova (forthcoming). Song 7:2 is possibly also euphemistic given the use of double entendre elsewhere in the description of the body of the Beloved.

²⁶ See the discussion in Delitzsch (1869: 359-360).

²⁷ The term *ʾāpīq* more usually means "stream" (cf. Job 6:15), but almost all translators take this to refer to "tubes" of bronze. Nevertheless, if phallic connotations are understood for Hebrew *ʿešem*, perhaps the image is more comprehensible, referring to rivers of semen.

skeletal strength. But the “tubes of bronze” have obvious monumental and phallic implications. In fact, as Ingrid Lilly (2019) has recently demonstrated, in biblical literature “bones” in male bodies are frequently figured and configured in discourses about reproduction and kinship. In particular, while dry, shattered, or rotten bones are indicative of poor health and even impotence, “wet bones” index a male body’s vitality and procreative power. Bones are therefore a substance of kinship, expanding our understanding of the semantic range and rhetorical use of *‘eṣem* to suggest an analogy between bones and semen. Similarly, an Old Babylonian birth incantation claims that bone is created from “the fluids of intercourse,” referring to semen.²⁸ The next body part found in v. 18, *gerēm*, is translated by the New Revised Standard Version as “limb,” but this too has the meaning “bone.”²⁹ This is again couched in monumental and phallic terms, “like bars of iron.”³⁰ In light of Lilly’s sophisticated analysis of the semantics of bones in the Hebrew Bible, we might therefore take both of these terms to once again refer euphemistically to the creature’s genitalia.³¹

Some of the phallic connotations which I have drawn for these verses have been acknowledged by previous scholars.³² But understanding this pericope as a transformed *waṣf*

²⁸ Cited in Lilly (2019: 436).

²⁹ Gen 49:14; Prov 17:22; 25:15.

³⁰ The term *māṭīl*, here “bar,” is another hapax, but can be interpreted in light of Arabic *maṭala*, “forge iron.” See Clines (2011: 1151).

³¹ Indeed, in 2 Kgs 9:13 *gerēm* is used to refer to the lower part of Jehu’s body, and certainly terms for the feet, legs, and lower body are frequently used to refer euphemistically to the genitalia in biblical literature. The idiom “to cover the feet” refers to urination (Judg 3:24; 1 Sam 24:3). In 2 Kgs 18:27 and the *Qere* of Isa 36:12, “water of the feet” is employed as a euphemism for urine. The description of Yahweh using the king of Assyria to shave the hair from Judah’s “feet” (Isa 7:20) is likely a reference to pubic hair (Niditch, 2008: 99). “Foot washing” is employed as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, thus David sends Uriah home to “wash your feet” when he wishes him to have sex with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:8). This is also likely to be the implied meaning of foot washing in Gen 19:2 and Judg 19:21. In Ruth 3:4, Naomi instructs Ruth to go to Boaz and “uncover the place of his feet,” and Sasson (1995: 67) suggests that this should be understood as a reference to Boaz’s penis. As well as the penis, *regel* can be used as a euphemism for female genitalia. In Deut 28:57, the afterbirth comes out from between a woman’s “feet.” Ezek 16:25 condemns the woman who opens her “feet” to anyone who passes, with the implication that she is behaving promiscuously.

³² In particular, the focus has been on the phallic implications of Behemoth’s “tail” in v. 18. See n. 20 for references. Bernat (2004: 336) also suggests that the references to the creature’s “strength” in v.

demonstrates that the poem as a whole is centred both structurally and thematically upon Behemoth's penis. Indeed, the reference to a "sword" in v. 19 may also be taken as having phallic connotations.³³ Job 40:15-18 therefore draws upon and subverts the "poetics of the body" in order to highlight and emphasize the creature's genitalia. The result is a claim that Behemoth has an outsize member.

The Rhetorics of the Penis in the Hebrew Bible

In order to unpack the implications of this claim, it is worth briefly considering the cultural discourses around penis size in the ancient Near East. This is in particular important because we should not assume that the various connotations of penis size are static across cultures and times. In particular, it is often noted that in ancient Greece, small penises were more culturally valued than large penises: across ancient Greek art and literature, large penises are associated with foolish and lustful men; whereas small penises were idealised as an attribute of the true intellectual (Dover, 1989: 126-128). To quote Aristophanes, "If you do these things I tell you, and bend your efforts to them, you will always have a shining breast, a bright skin, big shoulders, a minute tongue, a big rump and a small prick. But if you follow the practices of the youth of today, for a start you'll have a pale skin, small shoulders, a skinny chest, a big tongue, a small rump, a *big ham* and a long-winded decree."³⁴

17 "could plausibly be interpreted as trumpeting its subject's virility." According to Nicholas Ansell (2017: 107) the phallic connotations of these verses can be understood in light of Israel's salvation history, linking Behemoth to the "phallic aggression" of Israel's enemies found in Ezek 16:26 and 23:20.

³³ The MT reads: "let the one who made him draw near [with] his sword." This can be taken as a reference to God's sword, with the implication that God is the only one capable of slaying the beast. But the ambiguity of the pronouns means that the sword could also be taken as belonging to Behemoth: according to Carol Newsom (2003: 25), the idea may be that God has granted the creature with a sword "as a token of his lordship over other animals as the chief of the works of God." In the ancient warrior culture of the Levant weapons such as the bow and sword frequently had phallic implications. Thus according to Mark S. Smith (2014: 133), the bow in the Aqhat epic can be understood as an "extra-somatic body part," namely a symbol for the male genitalia. Thus whether belonging to Behemoth or to God, the sword may be understood as another phallic reference.

³⁴ Aristophanes, *Clouds*, ll. 1010-1019. For the text and translation see Sommerstein (1982: 103-117). On "ham" as a euphemism for penis, see Hubbard (2003: 95 n. 26).

Turning to the ancient Near East, nude human figures are among the earliest images that appear in ancient Near Eastern art. Initially female figures predominate, but by 6000 BCE male figures begin to appear, and from the fourth millennium onwards we see depictions of copulating couples (Bahrani, 1993). And where the male member is visible, these do show a clear preference for large genitalia (see e.g., Assante, 2007: 375, 393, 395). This is backed up by the textual evidence, where the Mesopotamian gods frequently display their fecundity through references to their large penis size. Enki in particular is noteworthy for this: in the Sumerian hymn *Enki and the World Order*, his ejaculate is such that it could fill the entire Euphrates (Black et al., 2006: 220-221). Similarly, the Ugaritic deity El has a penis “as long as the sea” (Wyatt, 2006: 330). El has significant associations with fertility, both as the father of the gods as well as the Ugaritic god who is most obviously concerned with human fertility (Hackett, 1989: 74). Thus large penis size was equated with fertility, and Mesopotamian potency incantations therefore promote an outsize member as a blessing: “May your penis become as long as a *mašgašu*-weapon!” (Biggs, 1967: 33). Conversely, in Sumerian disputation literature, the accusation of possessing a small and flaccid penis or drooping testes is utilized as an insult (Matuszak, 2019: 22).

T.M. Lemos (2011) has considered the cultural discourses around penis size in biblical literature in the context of her study of the marriage metaphor in the book of Ezekiel. In these texts, Judah is personified as a female figure married to the Israelite deity. Nevertheless, she lusts after the Egyptians and seeks to make them her lovers. In Ezek 16:26, we learn:

You engaged in illicit sex with the Egyptians—your neighbours, large of flesh—
multiplying your promiscuity and provoking me to anger.

The noun *bāśār*, “flesh,” is employed as a reference to the male member in a number of places in the Hebrew Bible.³⁵ In this verse, the illicit sexual activity of the woman with the

³⁵ This is one possible interpretation of Eve formed from Adam’s “rib,” which is then replaced with “flesh” in Gen 2:21. For the suggestion that the Hebrew *šēlaʿ* refers to Adam’s penis rather than his rib, see Zevit (2013: 137-150). The circumcised penis is referred to as *bēśar ʿorlat*, “flesh of foreskin” (Gen 17:11, 23; Lev 12:3). In Exod 28:42; Lev 4:11; 16:4, the Israelite priesthood are commanded to wear linen undergarments to cover their naked “flesh,” which is then specified in Exodus to refer to the area between the waist and thighs. In Leviticus 15, genital emissions are described as a “discharge

Egyptian men is described via the verb *zānāh*, “to engage in sexual relations outside or apart from marriage” (Erlandsson, 1981: 100). Due to the sexual nature of this verse, “large flesh” here must therefore be a reference to large genitalia.

Indeed, in Ezek 23:20 we learn that it is their large genitalia which is the source of Jerusalem’s sexual desire for the Egyptian men:

She lusted after their genitals, whose flesh was as large as those of donkeys, and their emission was as strong as that of stallions.

The Hebrew reads: “She lusted after their (m.pl.) *pilagšēhem*, concubines.” The pronoun is masculine plural, suggesting that this refers to concubines belonging to the Egyptian men. Yet the context precludes this interpretation, since the issue is the sexual activities of personified Jerusalem with the Egyptians themselves. Consequently, the New Revised Standard Version interprets the term in the idiomatic sense of “paramour,” but this still fails to explain how the pronoun relates to the noun. Instead, the New English Translation interprets *pilegeš* here as an idiomatic reference to the genitalia of the Egyptians, with the relative pronoun that follows introducing a more specific description of this: “she lusted after their genitals, *whose flesh* was as large as donkeys.” As we have seen, “flesh” is used elsewhere in Ezekiel 16 to describe male genitalia, and in the same context. This interpretation is strengthened by the next clause, which provides an equivalent idea: “their emission was as strong as that of stallions.” Here the noun *zirmāh* is usually interpreted as referring to the Egyptian’s “issue,” i.e. their seminal fluid.³⁶ Thus the seminal emission of the Egyptian men is compared to that of male horses, reminiscent of the fecundity of Enki, which was displayed through his ability to fill the Euphrates with his ejaculate. An alternative interpretation posits a metathesis of *resh* and *mem*, providing the reading *zēmōrāh*, “branch” or “twig,” and so as another euphemism for the penis (Lemos, 2011: 378 n. 2).³⁷ But either way, the implication is similar: the genitalia of these Egyptian men is either large in size or

from [a person’s] flesh.” With this in mind, it may be that the skin disease referred to in Leviticus 13, which affects the “skin of [a man’s] flesh” (v. 2), is a venereal disease.

³⁶ See KJV; NRSV; etc.

³⁷ In Hos 4:12, another word for “stick,” *‘ēš*, is used to parallel to *māqēl*, “staff,” to refer to the penis: “he inquires of his ‘stick’ and his ‘staff’ tells him, because the wind of prostitution caused him to err and commit adultery against his God.”

impressive in potency. In both Ezekiel 16 and 23, Lemos therefore argues that large genitalia is a particularly desirable attribute in a lover, and the source of Jerusalem's lust for the men of Egypt.

Lemos develops this interpretation with reference to 1 Kgs 12:10. This text is difficult to interpret: in response to a request that he lighten the burden placed upon the Israelites by his father, Rehoboam responds in the negative, saying: "my *little one* is thicker than my father's loins." The referent of "my little one" is not clear. The traditional view is that it refers to his little finger,³⁸ but it is surprising that this is then compared to his father's *loins*, which as we have seen, can be used to refer to genitalia. Instead, Lemos (2011: 382) concludes that the sense of this statement is a claim that Rehoboam has a larger *penis* than his father – and therefore will place a larger burden upon his subjects.³⁹ Here penis size is tied up with ideas of masculinity, authority, and power. Accordingly, a cultural preference for large penis size was operative in the world which shaped the Hebrew Bible.

Divine Willy Waving in Job 40

Thus far, I have argued that the transformed *wasf* in Job 40:15-18 functions to highlight and so to emphasize the genitalia of Behemoth. Focus on the implications of this description in terms of revealing the nature of the beast as either mythopoeic or mundane rather misses the point: instead, this text is making a claim that the creature has an outsize member. And this is crucial for understanding the function of the body description: since God is ultimately able to defeat the beast, the text therefore claims that Yahweh, so to speak, has the bigger balls. We might understand the battle between God and Behemoth as a divine willy waving contest.⁴⁰

³⁸ See KJV; NRSV; etc.

³⁹ See also the translation of Boer (2011: 44): "My limp cock is thicker than my father's cubes."

⁴⁰ While my language here is rather crude, I am consciously utilizing colloquialism in order to highlight the body description in Job 40 as a bawdy and humorous text. Much of the work on the book of Job has focussed on the sophisticated dialogue that the book enters into with other texts from the Hebrew Bible, in particular the wisdom tradition. See e.g., Dell (1991); Kynes (2012); Kynes and Dell (2013). This dialogue has sometimes seen the book described as "wisdom in revolt" (Perdue, 1991). An alternative direction of inquiry is the complex and complicated language of text, including poetic strategy and metaphor. See esp. e.g., Greenstein (2003; 2007; 2018). But recently, Katherine Southwood (2020) has opened up the possibility that the book may also be comedic, arguing that comedy "is a weapon used to expose and ridicule the idea that suffering is punishment for some wrongdoing" (2020: 2). Consequently, and without disputing the sophisticated literary artistry of the

This interpretation might at first seem surprising to those brought up in a Western tradition which emphasizes God's transcendence and incorporeality. Yet as critical readers of the Hebrew Bible are well aware, reference to God's body are found throughout biblical literature.⁴¹ The God of the Hebrew Bible has a body with hands, fingers, arms, and feet.⁴² His body therefore requires regulation through dress, diet, and rest.⁴³ He has a face with eyes, ears, lips, and a nose.⁴⁴ Consequently, this God is one who can touch, see, taste, smell, and hear.⁴⁵ And one implication of God's embodiment is his related sexuality.

Crucial here is the distinction between biological sex and gender. The Hebrew Bible assumes two biological sexes, in binary terms: male and female.⁴⁶ In contrast to biological sex, gender is a social construct referring to masculinity and femininity as roles which an individual can perform (Williams, 2010: 4).⁴⁷ And since this is socially constructed, there are culturally specific ideas and ideals about the ways in which these roles may be articulated – for example, as I have argued in this essay, in the biblical world large penis size had associations with ideal masculinity. Other traits of ideal masculinity in the Hebrew Bible include military might, beauty or bodily integrity, honour, provisioning, and virility (Haddox, 2016). The God of the Hebrew Bible has a body, and therefore a biological sex: he is consistently described by masculine pronouns and by male roles such as “king,” “father,” or

book of Job, my argument is that the body description in Job 40 subverts the “poetics of the body” in order to create a comedic and crude comment on Behemoth's hyper-masculinity – which is ultimately no match for the masculinity of God.

⁴¹ For recent studies on divine embodiment, see Hamori (2008); Sommer (2009); Wagner (2018); Marksches (2019); and Stavrakopoulou (forthcoming).

⁴² Exod 14:31; 24:10; 33:22; Deut 9:10; Isa 60:13; Zech 14:4; Ps 8:4; 1 Chr 28:19, etc.

⁴³ For God's clothing, see Isa 6:1-3; 63:1-13; Ezek 16:8; Dan 7:9; and Flynn (2019). Food for the gods is one possible explanation for the origin of sacrifice. In this context, see esp. Gen 8:21. The image of God at rest can be found at 1 Kgs 18:27; Pss 44:24; 121:4.

⁴⁴ Exod 4:14; 33:20-33; Ps 17:1-15; etc.

⁴⁵ On the divine senses, see Avrahami (2012: 130-141).

⁴⁶ Thus Gen 1:27 describes the creation of two sexes: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

⁴⁷ That the distinction between sex and gender is not anachronistic when applied to biblical literature may be demonstrated by 1 Kgs 2:2, when David instructs Solomon to “be a man,” and so an instruction for performed masculinity.

“bridegroom.”⁴⁸ In Exod 15:3, it is declared that “the Lord is a man.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, to be sure there are also places in the Hebrew Bible where God is described in more feminine terms, for example as one who has given birth, either to the collective Israel or an individual figure.⁵⁰ Thus God’s sex is male, but in certain biblical texts, we might claim that his gender presentation is more feminine.⁵¹ Nevertheless, these instances are rare, and it is much more usually the case that the God of the Hebrew Bible conforms to masculine gendered behaviours, to include shows of military might, beauty, honour, provisioning for his people, and virility.⁵²

This relates to a strong concern for the maintenance of gender boundaries found throughout the Hebrew Bible, as demonstrated by the prohibition against cross-dressing in Deut 22:5.⁵³ As a number of scholars have recognized, for a male to engage in behaviours more usually gendered as “feminine,” or vice versa, for a woman to perform more “masculine” gendered roles, is one way in which the biblical authors could polemicize

⁴⁸ For God as king, see Num 23:21; 1 Sam 12:12; Isa 44:6; Jer 10:10; Pss 5:3; 18:47; 24:10; 44:5; 47:7-8; 55:20; 68:25; 69:7; 74:12; 95:3; 107:11; 145:1. For God as father, see Isa 9:5; 63:16; 64:7; Ps 68:6; 89:26; Mal 2:10. For God as bridegroom, see Isa 62:5.

⁴⁹ Cf. Isa 42:13.

⁵⁰ Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14; 44:24; 46:3; Jer 1:5; Ps 139:13; Job 10:9, 11.

⁵¹ It has been suggested that this is a development dependent upon the advancement of monotheism: at one time, goddess worship had been a legitimate part of the Israelite cult, but as this was prohibited, Yahweh instead appropriated and subsumed characteristics and attributes that had previously been associated with goddesses. See Anderson (2015: 26-27).

⁵² God is described as a warrior in Exod 15:3; Isa 40:10; 42:13; Ps 48:9; 59:6; 78:65; 80:5, 8, 15, 20; Jer 20:11; Zeph 3:17. God’s beauty is typically described by the term *hōd*, “splendour.” See Isa 30:30; Hab 3:3; Pss 8:2; 96:6; 104:1; 111:3; 145:5; 148:13; Job 37:22; 1 Chr 16:27; 29:11; and Bauckham (2011). God is frequently described as requiring honour, particularly in the Psalms: see Pss 22:24; 50:15, 23; 89:9; 86:12. The image of God as provider is also a frequent one, see Gen 2:16; 3:21; 8:22; 22:14; Exod 34:24; Deut 29:5; Pss 34:10; 81:10; 105:16; Ezek 14:13, 21; 36:29; Amos 8:10; Mal 3:10; Ruth 1:6. In the marriage metaphor texts, Yahweh weds and beds personified Israel and Judah. On divine sexuality in the marriage metaphor texts, see Shields (1998).

⁵³ An anxiety around the transgression of performed gender roles may also have informed the prohibition against male homosexual sex in Lev 18:22, which is constructed as a prohibition against “having sexual intercourse with a male as one has sexual intercourse with a woman.”

against certain characters.⁵⁴ Thus while it is important to recognise that sex and gender are not interchangeable concepts, it is nevertheless the case that biblical literature equates the two, with expectations that ideal males are masculine, and females feminine. And as a *male* deity, the God of the Hebrew Bible is also typically gendered as *masculine*. In this context, it is unsurprising that we might expect this God to possess an outsize member.⁵⁵ Indeed, one possible interpretation of Isa 6:1 is that the prophet envisions God's penis filling the whole temple (Eslinger, 1995).⁵⁶ This is similar to Ezek 1:27 and 8:2, which describes God's *motnayim*, his "loins," glowing golden and giving off a brilliant light like fire. As we have seen, the loins are commonly used to euphemistically refer to the male member, and it has been suggested that the description here refers to the deity's genitalia (Boer, 2011: 44; Hooker, 2014: 27). Indeed, the form beheld in Ezek 8:2 is specifically said to have the

⁵⁴ For example, a number of scholars have argued that Jezebel is presented as a masculine woman as part of the Deuteronomistic rhetoric against the house of Omri. See Everhart (2010); Guest (2016: 68-75); and Lipka (2019).

⁵⁵ A similar implication to God's embodiment and related masculinity is suggested by the provocative title of Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's *God's Phallus* (1995).

⁵⁶ There is debate over the translation of the term *šûl*. When this occurs in the description of the priestly clothing in Exodus (28:33-34; 39:24-26), it refers to the hem of the priest's garment, and so the term is usually therefore interpreted as a train (KJV) or the hem of a garment (NET; NRSV) in Isa 6:1. But this was already disputed by G.R. Driver (1971) on the basis of his observations about ancient Near Eastern clothing practices as witnessed by Akkadian iconography. Instead, he proposed that the term must refer to God's lower limbs and feet. However, elsewhere *šûl* refers euphemistically to female genitalia (Jer 13:22, 26; Nah 3:5; Lam 1:9), and this governs Eslinger's interpretation (1995) of Isa 6:1 as a reference to God's penis. It is plausible that in these latter instances, the term is still functioning to describe the hem of a garment, but as a euphemistic reference to the genitals; as we have seen, references to the lower half of the body frequently function in this way (see esp. n. 31, above). Another term for the hem of a garment, *kānāp*, can also be used with the implication of the genitalia. This is the argument of Tod Linafelt (1989: 55) concerning the term in 1 Sam 24:5-7, with the implication that Saul has been castrated. Similarly, Danna Fewell and David Gunn (1990: 102) interpret Ruth's request for Boaz's *kānāp* in Ruth 3:9 as a request that he "extend his penis." In Deut 23:1; 27:20, sex with the wife of one's father is described by the idiom "to uncover his *kānāp*." Thus even if *šûl* in Isa 6:1 is interpreted as a reference to the hem of a robe, it may still have phallic connotations.

appearance of a man. The golden⁵⁷ colour of God's genitalia here recalls the gold of a divine cult statue, and that the brilliant light that this metal gives off is equivalized to fire suggests the organ is immense in size. Both Ezekiel and Isaiah therefore envision an embodied God within the temple – including his outsize member.⁵⁸ And all this is crucial for understanding the body description in Job 40 as a text about divine willy waving: in light of the implications we have drawn concerning penis size in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East, the consequence of all this is a claim to masculine power, sexual potency, and authority. Thus while Behemoth may have big balls, Yahweh's are bigger.⁵⁹

In this context, it is significant that God asks: “can anyone catch it by its eyes, or pierce its nose with a snare?” (v. 24). The answer to this rhetorical question is no man, but God alone. The creature is tamed via a nose piercing. In the wider context of the Hebrew Bible, nose piercing is frequently used in conjugal contexts, worn by women as a marker of betrothal (Quick, 2021b: 135-138). As well as domesticating Behemoth, this also functions to feminize the beast. Despite the masculine potency indicated by his penis size, Behemoth is ultimately feminized via his interaction with Yahweh, the most masculine of deities.

Conclusions

⁵⁷ The LXX translation of *ḥašmal* is *ēlectron*, an alloy of silver or gold.

⁵⁸ And this is unsurprising in light of Alan Hooker's (2014) assessment of God's *kābôd*, “glory,” as a potent sign of his masculinity – the visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah merely give this glory fleshy form.

⁵⁹ Job 40 is not the only text we might interpret in this light. 1 Kings 18 describes the conflict of the prophets of Yahweh with the prophets of Baal. In v. 27, Elijah taunts his opponents, who have been unable to rouse their god. The NET translates this verse as follows: “Yell louder! After all, he is a god. He may be deep in thought, or perhaps he stepped out for a moment.” This reflects the traditional Jewish interpretation of *śîaḥ* as “meditation.” But the lexeme is in hendiadys with *śîg*, “to go aside,” which can be used as a euphemism for urination. Gary Rendsburg (1988) therefore proposes the meaning of *śîaḥ* as “excrete,” connecting it to an Arabic root *šḥḥ*, “urinate, defecate.” Both terms therefore refer to excretion, and Rendsburg therefore proposes that the clause be translated as “he may be urinating.” At this crucial moment of competition between Yahweh and Baal, the latter has been found to be flaccid. Similar implications may be suggested for Isa 6:2 where, upon seeing the *šûl* of God filling the temple, the Seraphim cover their *regel*, “feet,” another common euphemism for genitalia (see n. 31, above). We might suggest that, recognizing the inferiority of their own genitalia against God's outsize member, the Seraphim accordingly hide theirs away.

In this paper, I have argued that the poetic description of Behemoth in Job 40:15-18 makes use of a literary technique for describing the body known as the *wasf*, elsewhere found most famously in biblical literature in the descriptions of the lovers in the Song of Songs. However, instead of providing a standard systematic itemization of this monstrous body, the book of Job subverts the *wasf* form. The description of Behemoth's body is truncated, making use of highly euphemistic language which focusses the reader upon one body part in particular: Behemoth's penis. Through the transformation of the *wasf*, the poet highlights and emphasizes the massive genitalia of the monster. And since God is ultimately able to defeat the beast, the text therefore claims that Yahweh has the superior genitalia, with implications for his masculine authority and power. Thus by exploring the ideas and values embedded within the literary and poetic devices employed in the description of Behemoth's body, new implications for understanding the battle between Yahweh and the beast can be brought to the fore: hidden within the language of this text is a divine willy waving contest. Despite Behemoth's outsize member and correlated claims to machismo, the creature is ultimately no match for the masculinity of God.

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