



Briefing Outline #97
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Dragons and The Bible

I. Introduction

Every continent and every people group has legends of dragons dating from antiquity. What makes this of interest, is the descriptions are strangely similar. In the KJV version of the Bible (1611), the word *dragon* or *dragons* occurs 35 times (22 in the OT and 13 in the NT). The English word *dragon* comes from the Greek word *drakon*. In almost all dictionaries and encyclopedias *dragon* is defined as an imaginary or mythological creature. The question then becomes: what exactly is this creature? Is the KJV Version of the Bible referring to dragons as real animals? Is it mythical, reflecting pagan Near Eastern literature, or is it symbolic?

II. A Composite Definition of *Dragon*

From ancient literature world-wide, the word *dragon* refers to an enormous fearsome monster-like, serpentine, lizard-like beast that sometimes has wings, sometimes breathes fire, is a predator with large teeth, killer of livestock and humans. Sometimes they are land-based, some fly, and sometimes they are creatures of the sea.

III. The Concerns and Problems of the Translators of the Bible

- A. After over 274 years, translators attempting to update the KJV removed the word *dragon* except where it was clearly symbolic, or existing in the sea. By that time society had begun to view dragons as creatures from fairy tales, or as mythological beasts.
- B. Only a few years later (1901) the American Standard Version (ASV) eliminated the word entirely in the Old Testament.
- C. The more contemporary English translations in use today for the most part, eliminate the word *dragon* in the OT and replaced it with such words as *behemoth*, *leviathan*, or, *sea monster*. Some more recent translations in footnotes postulate these creatures may be *whales* (if in the sea), *elephants*, *crocodiles*, or *hippopotamuses*. The most popular translation today, the ESV, maintains the word in the OT as long as it does not refer to a real creature.
- D. The Key Hebrew Words:
 1. The main Hebrew word the KJV translators translated *dragon* is *tannyn*. It is used 28 times in the OT. It can mean *serpent*, *dragon*, or *sea monster*. When plural, *tannynim*, can mean more than one, or ascribe to it the quality of being *great*, *majestic* or *colossal*.
 2. The Hebrew word *behemoth* is used many times in the OT, and means *beast* or *cattle*. However, in Job 40:15, the translators of the KJV left it untranslated. The reason must have been: the uniqueness of the beast described here.
 3. The Hebrew word *lwythan*, *leviathan*, occurs 5 times in the OT and means *large monster* or *water creature*.
 4. The Hebrew word *nachash* means *snake* or *serpent*.
 5. There appears to be some confusion between the Hebrew word translated *dragon* and the plural of the Hebrew word for *jackals*. The Hebrew words *tanim*, *jackals*, and *tannyn*: *dragon*, can look and sound similar. Some translations use *jackals* in places that do not seem to fit the context.
- E. Three Different Approaches have been used to Deal with the Interpretative Problem:
 1. The Hebrew words refer to large animals known to exist today, i.e., *whales*, *hippos*, *elephants*, *crocodiles*, etc.
 2. The word *tannyn* refers to the *chaos monster* in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, and is parallel to *tiamat* in Canannite mythology. *Tannyn* is simply the Hebrew equivalent of ANE myth.

3. The word *tannyn*, *dragon*, referred to real animal(s) now extinct.

F. In the NT the word is obviously used in a symbolic manner

The word *dragon* (the Greek word *drakon*) occurs 13 times in Revelation in chapters, 12, 13, 16, and 20. Here the word dragon is used as a symbol of power and evil. What is being described in this portion of Scripture is the ultimate victory over the God's archenemy, the devil, a drama which began in the Garden of Eden with the deception by the Serpent. Question: Why did the author use the dragon as a symbol if it were only mythological? If it is mythical, from what was it derived?

G. Why did the KJV Translators use the word *Dragons*? Several reasons:

1. They followed the Greek Old Testament translation known as the Septuagint (LXX) which used the Greek word *drakon* for the Hebrew word *tannyn*.
2. The Latin version used *drako*, meaning *dragon*.
3. At that time (early 17th Century) they believed dragons were real.
4. They believed dragons were created on the 5th or 6th day of creation.
So God created the great sea creatures (tannynim) Gen. 1:21.
And God created the beasts of the earth. (Behema) Gen. 1:25 (same day as man)
5. II Esdras 6:4ff. of the Apocrypha, says they were created on the 5th day.
6. The great scholars who translated the KJV of the Bible had every reason to believe that dragons were real from a multitude of historical sources, and from the Bible itself. (see the following Job passages.)

IV. The Strange Monsters from Job 40-41

A. Overview of the Passage:

1. The dialog with Job starts in chapter 38 where God speaks out of the whirlwind. He is responding to Job's inquiry as to why he is suffering.
2. God's response to Job is that he cannot understand the created order; only God the Creator can. God first elaborates about the inanimate order in chapter 38:1-38, then He switches to animals starting at verse 39.
3. The passage is poetic, but the phenomena are real. Note: all the animals described in chapter 38 and 39 exist in reality. They are real animals.
4. Starting in 40:15-24, he describes a beast He calls *behemoth*.
5. From 41:1-24 He describes a beast known as *leviathan*
6. The point is to show Job His power and sovereignty over nature.
7. The anatomy of the two beasts show God's crowning achievement. It seems logical for God to make His point that these critters have to be real!

B. Some Observations from the Job passage

1. This description cannot be a crocodile; they have spindly legs.
2. It can't be a hippo or an elephant; they have very small and insignificant tails!
3. The beast has no natural enemies. Only God can kill it.
4. Its hide cannot be punctured.
5. Its underside is impenetrable. Not so with a crocodile!
6. Nothing on earth is its equal.

V. Evidence From History

A. Evidence or mention of *dragons* was rife in Classical Greek and Roman history and literature; as well as Chinese, Mayan, Incas, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Anglo-Saxon, and European history and literature. The translators of the KJV were very aware of these sources, and for them, the existence of *dragons* was an accepted fact.

B. Much of this ancient literature was obviously mythological (dragons were a symbol of power and evil). (But we have to ask: how did the myths originate?) Many of these ancient accounts are reported as factual and as eyewitness accounts. They describe a beast of unusual size and ferocity. They devoured elephants, stags and bulls, and could swallow a man. In the Roman army during the Punic War soldiers were attacked by a dragon 120 ft. long. After it killed several soldiers they finally used a battering ram to kill the beast. It's skin was used to make armor (Pliny).

1. Classical Greek and Roman literature: Homer, Aristotle, Pliny, Diodorus Siculus, Hesiod, Artemidorus, Strabo, Iphicrates, Herodotus, Philostratus, etc. all make mention of dragons.

In 1349 on the Island of Rhodes we have this account: *This monster is described as the bulk of a horse or ox, with long neck and serpent's head—tipped with mule's ears—the mouth widely gaping and furnished with sharp teeth, eyes sparkling as though they flashed fire, four feet provided with claws like a bear, and a tail of a crocodile, the whole body being coated with hard scales.* Gould p. 206.

2. Chinese culture and history: is literally filled with dragons; much being mythological. However, in the Chinese zodiac of 12 creatures, isn't it unusual that 11 are animals that existed and the 12th mythological? Marco Polo (13th Century) encountered dragons during his journey to China. He says:

Leaving the city of Yachi, and traveling ten days into a westerly direction, you reach the Province of Karazan which is the name of its chief city... Here are seen huge serpents, ten paces in length, and ten spans in the girth of the body. At the fore-part, near the head, they have two short legs, having three claws like those of a tiger, with eyes larger than a fourpenny loaf (pane da quattro denari) and very glaring. The jaws are wide enough to swallow a man, the teeth are large and sharp, and their whole appearance is so formidable, that neither man, nor any kind of animal, can approach them without terror.

3. Jewish Sources:

- a. The Apocrypha of the OT contains several references. See: *Bel and The Dragon*.
- b. Second Temple literature, otherwise known as the Dead Sea Scroll material, contain many references to *dragons, behemoth* and *leviathan*.
- c. Josephus gives every evidence that Jews historically viewed dragons as tangible reality. He gives an account of Moses encountering winged serpents in the wilderness. Interestingly enough Isa.30:6 notes a *fiery serpent* in the Negev.
- d. Benjamin of Tudela (12th Century) tells of encountering dragons in his travel.

4. Christian Sources:

- a. The Apostle Phillip supposedly killed a dragon at Heiropolis. This admittedly sounds more like a legend.
- b. Ignatius: Late 1st Century, Bishop of Antioch and known by some of the Apostles
- c. Eusebius 3rd and 4th Century
- d. St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 4th Century describes a dragon 105 ft long.
- e. St. John of Damascus (7th to 8th Century)

5. Anglo Saxon Sources:

Bill Cooper chronicles many stories in England some dating from 336 B.C. where a king was killed and eaten by a dragon. He gives another account:

In Suffolk in 1405 close to the town of Bures, near Sudbury, there has lately appeared, to the great hurt of the countryside, a dragon, vast in body, with crested head, teeth like a saw, and a tail extending to an enormous length. Having slaughtered the shepherd of a flock, it devoured many sheep. (p.133)

He has records of dragon encounters from 200 towns and cities, and reports one as late as 1669. He gives many ancient reports of dragons in the Lochs of Scotland!

6. European History and Literature

Evidence of the existence of dragons is found in literature, tapestries, and Medieval Art. Leonardo da Vinci included a drawing of a dragon among other animals known to exist.

VI. Evidence from Pre-history Sources

Evidence is found in cave art, rock carvings, in Native American stories, Incan and Mayan art, dragon artifacts, and in dinosaur and human footprints found together. The latter is extremely controversial, but seems to be factual. They are found in Texas, Utah, New Mexico, and in Turkmenistan.

VII. Dragons are Descriptively similar to Dinosaurs

- A. The word *dinosaur* was not coined until 1841.
- B. A 1946 Dictionary says dragons are now mostly extinct!
- C. Dinosaurs were created on the 6th Day the same day as man. This, of course, has implications; it means that dinosaurs and man were contemporary.

VIII. Recent and Contemporary Discoveries

- A. In the early 50's Philip Abelson discovered amino acids in Devonian fish, Jurassic Stegosaur, and Cretaceous Anatosaurus. It was largely ignored.
- B. In 1994 a group of students from Cedarville University in Ohio, made an expedition to the northern tip of Alaska and found dinosaur bones that had not yet been fossilized. Their discovery was ignored.
- C. In 1990 Dr. Mary Schweitzer, U. of N. Carolina, discovered red blood cells in a T-Rex fossil. She says her discovery was so shocking she repeated the experiment 17 times! She then published her discovery in 1993 and shocked the paleontological world. In subsequent experiments, she found soft tissue, blood vessels, collagen, dino DNA and other organic material. Dinosaur fossils also contained carbon 14! DNA cannot survive for more than a few thousands years given the right conditions. After 50,000 years there should not be any C14. Currently, there are now about 85 reports of biological remnants in fossils purported to be millions of years old!

IX. Conclusion

The evidence seems overwhelming: the dragons of history were dinosaurs. They were on the Ark and survived the flood. They lived and were contemporaries of humans. There is a reason why a dragon is used to symbolize the archenemy of God and mankind. No created animal was more feared than a dragon. In Revelation the symbol is intensified as a dragon with 7 heads!

For Further Study:

Cooper, Bill. *After The Flood*.
 Davis, Buddy, Liston, Mike, and Whitmore, John. *The Great Alaskan Dinosaur Adventure*.
 Isaacs Dareck. *Dragons or Dinosaurs*.
 Gould, Charles. *Mythical Monsters*.
 Miller, Dave. *Behemoth & Leviathan*.
 Nelson, Vance. *Untold Secrets: Dire Dragons*.
 Rose, Carol. *Giants, Monsters, & Dragons*.
 Sagan, Carl. *The Dragons of Eden*.
 Sarfati, Jonathan, and Tay, Joel. *Titans of the Earth, Sea, and Air*.
 von Fange, Erich A. *Noah to Abraham: The Turbulent Years*.