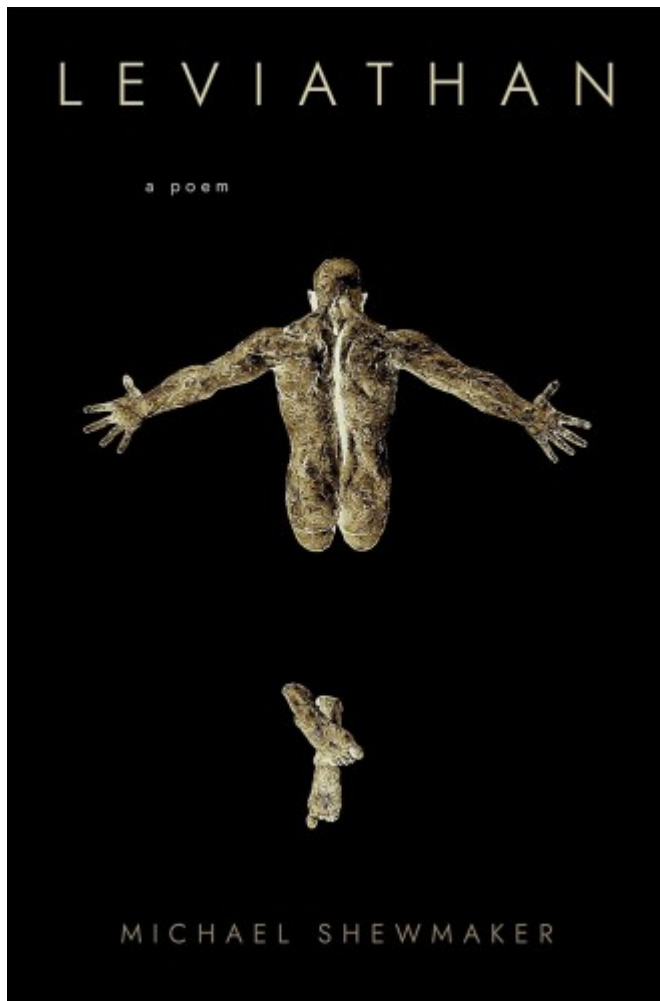


A Job who's read Job

Poet Michael Shewmaker imagines a suffering Christian in Kilgore, Texas, with three unhelpful friends.

by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [December 2023](#) issue
Published on December 14, 2023

In Review



Leviathan

A Poem

By Michael Shewmaker
Louisiana State University Press
[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)

The title of this book-length poetic drama is *Leviathan* rather than *Job*, although it tells the story of J (Joiner) as he lies covered with sores on his stinking bed, in dialogue with his three unhelpful friends. His children have been killed in a horrific auto accident, his wife has left, and a storm is always brewing with thunder and funnel clouds, darkness and abandonment, and never life-giving rain. God is silent.

Leviathan is, traditionally, the king of chaos. But in scripture it is also a sign of God's power and might. Michael Shewmaker explores this paradox. Other writers have tried it—Archibald MacLeish, for one, in his classic play, *J.B.* But I'm not aware of anyone else who has written of a post-incarnation Job, a Christian Job experiencing the devastation of loss, illness, loneliness, and the distance of a crucified God who might be Leviathan himself.

In the book of Job, the devil wagers with God. In Shewmaker's book, the devil may well be God. This is poetry that questions sharply and asks for impossible answers, using stunning language which is, impossibly, both unusual and familiar.

The setting is tornado-rich Kilgore, Texas, among the oil fields. The conversations with friends Ellis, William, and Dalton are filled with memories of high school and college football, coaches, a bullied gay friend who died by suicide, references to unsavory behavior of acquaintances, and insinuations from J's tormenting friends that surely he must have sinned to deserve such suffering. As one of them says, "Your sin is that you think you haven't sinned."

J says he has asked for forgiveness, but for what? "Why me?" he asks.

And even if I've sinned, remember, Lord,
you made me from the brittle clay.
Whatever faults I have, I have because
of you. Forgive *me*? Take my pain
away. Please let me sleep. And I'll forgive you.

This statement turns the tables and asks the big theodicy questions about suffering. J's friend Dalton gets it backward when he says, "We live in grace now. . . . The New

/ Testament, not the Old. Rethink your scriptures. / Get right with God.” He continues: “You’re only reaping what you’ve sown.” But of course grace doesn’t work that way, and that is what J seems to know. “If everyone was bullied for / their sin, you’d all be laid up like I am,” he says. God is not counting it all out on an abacus.

J has read of Job, “the oldest story,” and insists he “won’t be scripted.” Faith requires doubt, he says.

At one point, Ellis remembers a poem they studied in college: R. S. Thomas’s “In a Country Church.” As Ellis recalls it, a man praying in church hears wings, not of angels but of bats. Ellis accuses J of being like that man: “You pray in ignorance, beneath / your sins, and wonder why the Lord / won’t hear you.” He goes on to say that suffering is “what binds us to the cross.” J disagrees with Ellis and argues that he has missed the point of the poem. Thomas’s poem contains these lines:

He kneeled long
And saw love in a dark crown
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
Golden with fruit of a man’s body.

J understands Thomas’s lines. He says to Ellis:

That praying man found love

beneath those wings—the dark crown
blazing,
the winter tree. He wasn’t ignorant.
At least, not in the way you mean it.
His answer *was* the cross.

Note the italicized, emphatic “was” in J’s response. Indeed, the “praying man” sees that the answer is the cross, as does J—although he is not completely satisfied with that answer.

After his friends leave, J complains to God, “Where have you gone?” “You’ve left me in the storm,” he says, even while he recognizes, “Who am I to question?”

In some of the most striking and beautiful lines of Shewmaker's poem, the Unnamable finally answers, echoing those well-known lines from scripture:

Where were you when I uttered the first word?
Tell me, where were you when I halved
the darkness and the light?
 . . . Can you control
the thunderhead? Enlist the lightning
with a brief word or clap of hands? Can you
decide which pastures need the rain?
And which are flooded?

God continues, asking where J was when his friend hanged himself—and where he was when God's own son was nailed to the cross. J counters, pointing out that the son had a choice but he does not. J then asks the final question: "What was / your unjust suffering worth if those like me, / or worse, must still endure it too?" He refuses God's name for him: Job. He says, "You died to bring us grace. . . . Where is your grace for me?"

Near the end of the poem, it becomes clear that J loves his children and his wife even more than he loves God. And here we have it—a modern Job whose words ring true to the contemporary situation. A friend has complained to me that when candidates for pastor in his church are asked about their priorities, they always put family first. That sounds good until you read this remarkable poem and recall the depth of what it means to know and be known by God. Still, I think in the end we are on Job's side, asking his same penetrating questions.