

The Images of the “Monster” Tradition, Symbolism and Representations

KARIM SIMPORE

Many authors throughout centuries have tried to interpret the essence of the monster by exploring and exposing the mysteries related to the physical, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions of monstrosity. Iris Idelson-Shein contends that the originality of the concept of the monster finds its etymological roots in classical Latin. As Idelson-Shein reveals, “The very word Monster is derived from the Latin monstrare, meaning to demonstrate, to warn, or to reveal” (37). From this perspective, in an article entitled “Throne Visions and Monsters: The Encounter between Danielic and Enochic Traditions,” Helge Kvanvig contests standard interpretations of the monster by many scholars. As Kvanvig explains:

In *Roots of Apocalyptic I* argued for another possibility, interpreting the imagery of the monsters as a Babylonian demonic imagery. I found the list of fifteen demons in *The Assyrian Vision of the Nether World* as especially significant, because it contained many of the features represented in Dan 7 in its vivid description of the monsters.aa (260)

In the same vein, Joseph T. Lienhard studies the controversial works of Origen Adamantius who was one of the pioneers of Christian theology. He points out “Opposition to Origen had been growing for centuries. Shortly before Constantinople II, the Emperor Justinian issued an edict against Origen’s person and doctrines, in the form of a conciliar decree” (52). However, Guy Williams and other scholars highlight the evident textual ambivalence in Origen’s contentious works regarding his definition of a demon. In this regard, Williams avers, “it is unclear as to whether Origen considers the beasts to be a purely demonic symbol or whether he considers physical beasts, with which Paul fought, to be instruments of the devil. The latter interpretation should probably be favored, since it fits better with the first quotation, but we cannot be certain” (55). When analyzing the Bible, the reader is struck by the richness and splendor of these sacred texts from a historical, spiritual, and mythical perspective. Biblical authors depict various beasts that often have conflicting identities. Indeed, Judeo-Christian holy scriptures are replete with descriptions, commentaries, and prophecies that are inextricably linked to a frightening world. For instance, in the Book of Revelation, the author asserts:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she is being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born (12:1-4).

Noting that much has been written about this nuanced subject, Anne E. Gardner posits: “A debate exists as to the identity of the beast with the majority of critical scholars asserting that it represents Media while a minority, of a conservative bent, posit that it stands for both Media and Persia” (223). In the same vein, Scott B. Noegel theorizes on the physical form that these demons assume: “Thus, some texts understand the creature as possessing multiple heads, others see it as having one. Sometimes it also is equated with a lion or a sea monster with lionlike features”. (241)

The biblical passage cited above helps us to evaluate the complex identity relationship between cosmic forces and humanity. In this passage, the fusion of the human —represented by the woman— and cosmic realm is quite remarkable. Details are scant regarding this woman endowed with super-human powers who clothes herself with the sun and stands on top of the moon wearing a crown of twelve stars. Regardless, it is evident that this enigmatic woman possesses a power that grants her the status of a goddess. Highlighting this divine specificity of the woman, Iris Idelson-Shein explains that this image of a woman symbolizes a force that if not mastered might turn into a monster. As Idelson-Shein notes: “That female power is represented as a horrendous, murderous deformity, a transgression of nature [...]. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it” (54).

Nonetheless, in spite of this seemingly supernatural strength, she remains vulnerable. According to the biblical narrative, a monstrous dragon with seven heads and ten horns sprang up from out of nowhere hurling a third of the stars down upon the earth. Going from bad to worse, this monster is ready to devour the child to whom the woman was about to give birth. This spectacle reflects a Manichean vision of chaos underpinned by a perpetual war between good and evil. In an effort to understand this dichotomy between good and evil more fully, Scott J. Jones underscores that our universe is so chaotic that it is inhabited by beasts, monsters and humans who are all creatures of God (856).

Echoing Jones’s analysis, Michael V. Fox highlights contemporary perceptions concerning the notion of the monster and beast in the larger context of the concept of cosmic chaos: “In an effort to bring to the fore the chaos and danger thought to inhere in God’s description of the cosmos, contemporary commen-tators have dramatized the evil of Behemoth and Leviathan. The beasts are described as ‘horridly terrifying creatures’ and ‘uncon-trollable, except to a limited degree by God” (9). As the Bible states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:1-3). In the same cosmogonic context, Joseph T. Lienhard analyzes the scope and the symbolic value of the “Word” which represents the origin of all the creatures that inhabit the cosmos:

The anath-emas dealt mostly with cosmologi-cal and eschatological speculation: the preexistence of souls, including Christ’s; that the Word of God be-came a cherub for cherubim and a seraph for seraphim; that the resurrec-tion body will be spherical (an accusa-tion that refused to die); that celestial bodies have rational souls. (52)

Guy Williams claims that as far as the status of the beast in this cosmic dynamic of creation is concerned, it stands out from the dominion of the myth that embodies the existential realm: “In addition to these general patterns of folklore, certain beasts were elevated to a particular mythical status. Behemoth is a case in point” (46). Hence, modern theorists tend to establish causal links between the catastrophic circumstances that plague humans and their relationship to malevolent forces symbolized by creatures like Behemoth or Leviathan. Punishment is thus accepted and validated as the result of unnatural relations between man and evil in the form of a monster or the devil, which is often represented by a snake. As the author of the Book of *Genesis* reveals:

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons (3:4-6).

As many critics note regarding the representation of the devil as a snake, we witness the multiplication of various incarnations of the devil through beasts or monsters such as the lion, dragon, and leopard. Moreover, the singularity of Scott B. Noegel’s point is noteworthy, given that he distances

himself from the positions taken by most of the critics in the field. Specifically, Noegel maintains, “The devil is none other than Leviathan, whom Rev 12:9, 20:2 recognizes as Satan. In Western Christian-ity, beginning already in the 3rd century CE, one finds paintings, sarcophogai, and other funerary art that link Jonah to Leviathan by depicting the ‘fish’ as a fantastic sea monster with large sharp teeth, tall ears, mammalian forearms, and a long serpentine tail” (221).

However, we can also find animals that have conflicting representations. For example, it is noteworthy in the following passages from the Bible that the lion has several representations that may appear to be incompatible to some readers:

“Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain (Number 23:24); “And of Gad he said, Blessed be he that enlargeth Gad: he dwelleth as a lion, and teareth the arm with the crown of the head. (Deuteronomy 33:20); “And of Dan he said, Dan is a lion’s whelp: he shall leap from Bashan. (Deuteronomy 33:22); “And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father’s sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: (1Samuel 17: 34). These biblical passages underscore the importance of the diversity of the representations of the beast illustrated here by the lion. This diversity represents an opportunity to consider the Judaic dogmas related to the evolution of beliefs concerning the concept of the beast. Demonstrating that we find ourselves in the midst of a supernatural universe, Guy Williams asserts: “From earliest times in Judaism, wild animals tended to be conflated with supernatural beasts and evil spirits. Anything that lived outside the bounds of civilized life, in wild and deserted places, tended to be viewed as unfamiliar, uncanny, and dangerous” (46). This fundamental assertion goes beyond the representations of the beast.

Indeed, as David I. Shyovitz argues, these dogmatic representations reveal a belief system specific to a culture rather than a quest for spirituality: “In this view, monsters are ‘specular objects’—the monstrous creatures that surface in particular historical contexts serve as lenses that reveal the key beliefs, values, and anxieties of the cultures in which they were generated” (522). As Steven J. Friesen points out, these monsters live in places as varied as they are multiform. While some reside in oceans, like Leviathan, some like Behemoth are more present in the desert: “In this section we learn that the two primordial monsters were separated at creation. Leviathan dwells in the abyss of the ocean at the sources of the deep, while Behemoth dwells in a mythic desert east of Eden” (Friesen 304).

Friesen’s point of view is supported by passages from Daniel and Revelation. As the author of the Book of Daniel recounts: “In my visions of the night I, Daniel, was gazing intently and I saw a great sea churned up by the four winds of heaven, and four huge beasts coming up out of the sea” (Daniel 7:2). Irena Doroto Backus presents the historical and geographical context in which the Book of Daniel was written. Backus explains, “The book of Daniel probably written during the period of Antiochus Epiphanes (175–163 BCE) to comfort the Jews in their distress and to assure them of approaching divine intervention, marks the beginnings of apocalyptic literature” (Backus 59). The case in point here is the focus on the struggles of the Jewish people. Enlightening the reader on the discourse of the beast viewed through a Christian lens, Backus emphasizes, “Scholars have paid particular attention to the place of anti-Jewish polemic in medieval discourses of monstrosity, noting that Christian think-ers’ ideas about and depictions of Jews and monsters were oftentimes mutu-ally reinforcing” (522). Arguing along similar lines, Joseph T. Lienhard recalls the foundational roots of the Christian faith that marked the life of Origen, a foundation that allowed him to adopt an atypical lifestyle: “In his late teens or early twenties, however, Origen undertook a rigor-ous ascetical life: fasting, going bare-foot, sleeping on a simple mat. He also served the church of Alexandria as a catechist” (52).

Despite his early devotion to the Christian faith, Lienhard illustrates that Origen will be portrayed as a heretic and subsequently treated as an enemy of the church. As Lienhard explains, “In its eleventh canon, the Second Council of Constantinople (553) anathematized Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, and Origen, along with their impious writings” (52). In this instance, Helge S. Kvanvig’s comments allow us to understand that Daniel’s choice was not made by chance. His decision resulted from a special meeting between Daniel and the Giants. As Kvanvig asserts, “The

contact between Daniel and Giants is so close that it seems to indicate dependence as well. The most convincing argument for this is the identical words in the same order” (255). Conversely, Pieter GR De Villiers is not concerned about the historical spaces in which these monsters evolve. De Villiers is interested in the actions and characteristics of these monsters. Ultimately drawing the conclusion that these monsters are interchangeable representing the same evil spirit (i.e. the devil that manifests itself in several forms), he maintains: “When it comes to the portrayal of evil in Revelation, it tends to focus more on the two beasts and Babylon, thereby neglecting the character and actions of the dragon, which is ultimately the ‘prime evil’ and protagonist of evil in the book” (De Villiers 58). David I. Shyovitz answers his critics by illustrating the multiples stages of the beast’s perpetual transformation: “Medieval biblical exegetes followed the lead of their forebears, and also took pains to explain away biblical passages which describe apparent metamorphoses” (525). Proposing a similar interpretation, Guy Williams sheds light on the accounts of Apostle Paul who also dealt with demons considered to be beasts: “Cor 15:31 So, in the following, it will be argued that Paul viewed the confrontations and physical threats that he experienced in Ephesus as instigated by the evil spirits, or ‘beasts’ at work in the demon-possessed, sorcerers, and idolaters of the city” (45). According to Graydon F. Snyder, this perspective could find its source in the behavior of the first Christians. In the face of danger and vulnerability, they transcended the visible and perceptible nature of the monster itself. As Snyder argues: “When people face an unknown threat, they often see things not otherwise visible” (7). In the same vein, Greg Goswell, a renowned expert on the Book of Daniel, illustrates in an article entitled “The Visions of Daniel and Their Historical Specificity” that the representation of the kingdoms found in the second chapter of Daniel is of the utmost importance. As Goswell avers, “In the prayer of Daniel, in which he praises God for his revelation of the content (and interpretation) of the king’s dream” (Dan 2:20–23), the description of God as he who ‘removes kings and sets up kings’ (2:21) is particularly significant” (130). Concluding that this distinction or dichotomy between the different actors and agents who populate the cosmos is simply reductive, Scott C. Jones indicates that in God’s perception, “Contrary to Job’s imaginings, Yahweh’s world is one in which the wild and the monstrous are central, and they are the objects of God’s provision” (855). To comprehend Jones’s position more fully, it is essential to reflect upon this passage from the book of *Psalms*:

Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.
 Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.
 Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.
 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded, and they were created.
 He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away.
 Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
 lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,
 your mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,
 wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds,
 kings of the earth and all nations, you princes, and all rulers on earth,
 young men and maidens, old men, and children.
 Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
 He has raised up for his people a horn, [2] the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart.
 Praise the Lord. (148: 4–14)

In the words of John B. Geyer, we see an effort to examine and interpret the paradoxes implicated in cosmic forces: “In the so-called Zion Theology when Yahweh is recognized as king, he establishes the earth firmly so that it cannot be moved (Ps. xciii 1). But in the time of chaos the world trembles and shakes (Isa. xiii 13) which is the case also in Ps. lx 4” (John 50). These passages demonstrate that the Lord’s fingerprints are inscribed upon all living beings and visible throughout the entire cosmos. In Genesis 1, we learn that sea monsters were created long before humans. Therefore, monsters and

humans derive their existence from the same creator. The physical description of these monsters recounted by John is so terrifying to the point that it seems like a horror movie:

The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast (*Revelation* 13:1).

Williams in the effort to decipher this revelation has to disconnect the natural and the supernatural aspects of the beast: “The more general blurring of boundaries between the natural and supernatural ‘beast’ also continued to develop in apocalyptic traditions” (47). In this chaotic world, John seems to witness a strange manifestation: a monster comes out of the sea with ten horns upon which blasphemous names are stamped. This monster possesses representative elements of the leopard, the bear, and the lion. A monster standing by the sea known as a dragon accompanies this hybrid beast. Shedding more light on the representation of these horns, the author of the Book of *Daniel* writes:

The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time (*Daniel* 7:24).

William’s point of view on the separation of both characteristics explained above is in line with the commentary of David I. Shyovitz who observes a change in Nebuchadnezzar who used to enjoy certain privileges due to his rank of king before being chased into a bush and starting to eat like an animal. As Shyovitz highlights: “For instance, in his commentary to *Daniel* 4:30, an obscure verse that describes how Nebuchadnezzar was ‘driven away from his people, and ate grass like cattle,’ the twelfth-century biblical exegete” (525). What is striking here is that despite scary and repulsive characters, the Bible can use narratives constructed upon monstrous paradigms to explain or predict future events. As the Book of *Daniel* explains, these monstrous horns represent kings or those with a great deal of power who will oppress the saints for ‘a time, times and half a time.’ Later in *Revelation* 20, we discover that this dragon will be chained down and thrown into the abyss. Attempting to interpret the future of the beast that has yet to transpire, Greg Goswell theorizes, “The other exegetical possibility is that the reader is meant to understand that the image is demolished from bottom to top, for the stone strikes the image at its weakest point, the feet of iron mixed with clay that forms its base” (Goswell 131). In the context of the last days of these kings, Irena Backus further elucidates, “The first beast thus represents the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon. He is given a human heart and placed on his feet because of his knowledge of God. The second beast, the bear, is the kingdom of Medes and Persians which destroyed the Assyrian kingdom” (Backus 62). However, as Williams notes, the Jewish tradition of associating the devil with wild animals, especially as a physical persecutor, was also preserved in apocalyptic literature. Early Christianity adopted a large amount of this Jewish ‘beast’ imagery, with particularly prominent examples being the abusive, eschatological monsters of *Revelation* and the ‘roaring lion’ (the devil), who causes persecution in *Pet.* 5:8–9. (49).

The sea seems to be almost omnipresent in these depictions of the universe as monstrous. However, Graydon F. Snyder identifies a sort of spatial displacement in the present age. The monster no longer appears to be satisfied with haunting the sea, it has now conquered the totality of space. As Snyder notes, “We do not see many Sea Monsters, but now the unknown is out there in space, not down under the water. So we see aliens, some which take on the form of monsters more terrifying than anything sighted by Perseus or Hercules” (7). Adopting the same perspective as Snyder, we could argue that *Daniel* also painted an image of the monster throughout space. In the Book of *Daniel*, the author reveals, “I saw another, a beast like a leopard with four birds wings on its back, this

creature had four heads and it was invested with sovereign power. Next my visions of the night I saw a fourth beast, dreadful and grisly, exceedingly strong, with great iron teeth and bronze claws” (*Daniel* 7:6). This idea of monsters invading almost the entire space seems to be shared as well by Scott C. Jones who finds that these monsters are contesting the commonly accepted limits of reality that deserve to be reconsidered. As Jones contends, “But in my view, they challenge the very norms of monstrosity itself. So, rather than being demonic creatures that are ‘cosmological accidents’ or ‘evil which escapes the command of gods and humans, these monsters and their glorious bod-ies are central to the created order” (Jones 861). Indeed, Leviathan, which is the predominant monster par excellence in biblical writings, seems to be found in many books of the Bible.

Similar to Jones who tries to explain the ambivalence of creation and the back and forth between humans and monsters, Scott B. Noegel sends the reader back to cosmogony origins of the monster when God created the Leviathan on the fifth day: “According to the midrash, this was a special creature, made by God on the fifth day of creation, and differed from Leviathan, with which Jonah conversed. Le-viathan, the king of the sea, was another of God’s creatures, intended for his play (*Psalms* 104:26) and ultimately for feasting upon by the righteous in the messianic world to come according to this Jewish concept” (238). However, Williams warns us that this tendency to associate monsters with beasts could find its origins in Jewish customs. As Williams argues, “The Jewish tradition of associating the devil with wild animals, especially as a physical persecutor, was also preserved in apocalyptic literature. Early Christianity adopted a large amount of this Jewish ‘beast’ imagery, with particularly prominent examples being the abusive, eschatological monsters of Revelation and the ‘roaring lion’ (the devil), who causes persecution in *Pet.* 5:8-9” (49). We find it in *Psalms*, *Isaiah*, *Job*, and *Revelation*. The Leviathan sometimes manifests itself as a snake or a dragon with several heads. In this regard, Michael V. Fox concludes, “the biblical authors pictured Leviathan in various ways” (12). In various passages of the Bible, the snake is represented differently. In *Genesis*, the devil takes the form of a serpent to deceive Eve and to coerce her into consuming the fruit of the forbidden tree. Consequently, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, and they begin to wander endlessly because of this seductive snake. On the other hand, Moses’s snake, the one created when the prophet throws his staff on the ground, is totally different from the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This snake, which is sometimes a staff, is used to perform divine miracles. For instance, in *Exodus* 7, Moses challenges Pharaoh’s magicians that will be swallowed by the prophet’s serpent. This striking image of Moses’ staff, which is transformed into a snake according to *Exodus*, should be understood in the context of Lee M. Jefferson’s research: “In third and fourth-century catacomb images of Christ raising Lazarus, the staff appears in a majority of the scenes” (227).

This rod is also present in the book of *Numbers* (21: 9) where we are told that Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. Whomever this snake bit would be healed by gazing upon this serpent of brass. Here, the combination of the two characteristics of the snake— a beast endowed with a mortal, venomous power and the figurative snake with healing powers made by Moses—is evident. Scott B. Noegel’s analysis of Jonah and the giant fish allows us to draw parallels with Moses’ bronze serpent. In general, fish are meant to be caught and consumed by man. However, the fish seems to be the predator and the man the prey in this situation, although the beast did not digest him. Through this experience, Jonah discovers a divine wisdom that enables him to preach to the people of Ninevah as he was instructed to do before he ran away: “In exchange, the fish shows Jonah the mysteries of the great deep through his eyes, which serve as illuminated windows” (220–221).

Steven J. Friesen tries to explain how a single beast can have so many representations. In traditional Israeli society, several names could be given to the same monster. In the Book of Revelation, there are attributes that personify the monster rendering it physically tangible. We discover that in the end the dragon will be caught and chained up for one thousand years before being unleashed during the last judgment. Arie C. Leder proposes a new interpretation of this extraordinary piece of wood from a different angle:

Several aspects of the meaning of “staff” are illustrated by four divine figures painted in the tomb of Seti I. Each holds a staff and is accompanied by an inscription. In ascending order, the first figure holding a tree of life is called the lord of the creative word; the second, a royal figure, holds a shepherd’s staff; the third figure carries the was staff emblematic of life and health; and the fourth holds a simple staff (97–98).

In the Book of Jonah, the author recounts the story of Jonah fleeing God’s presence. He found himself in a boat and was thrown into the water for three days in the belly of a monster fish who ends up vomiting him. Jonah’s stay in the monster’s belly for three days could be interpreted as an allegory of the duration of Jesus’ death that was resurrected on the third day. The monster is nearly always present from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. Jonah could be a representation of Jesus because he was on a divine mission to convert the people of Nineveh. The fish monster obviously represents the crucifixion, the death, the darkness, and the hell that engulfed Jonah for three days. This image is reminiscent of the efforts of many theologians who are trying to figure out where Jesus was between the time of the crucifixion and the time of the resurrection. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, it is clearly stated. Therefore, it says: “When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above” (*Ephesians* 4: 8–10). What are the lower regions of the earth to which the author refers? Nobody knows. However, some scholars believe that he also liberated captives and gave them gifts. Although the image of death associated with the monster is somewhat frightening, we also know that a victory is won, salvation is proclaimed, and captives are delivered through this monster of death. After being spewed out by the monster fish, Jonah accomplished his mission of deliverance and salvation in Nineveh. In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we read: “Death, where is your sting? Hell, where is your victory? Here, the scarecrow, the fear of the monster that brings death falls to shreds. The monster is no longer victorious. His power is broken.

The presence of the dragon in the scriptures does not just lie at the intersection between the past and present, but it also unveils future events depicted in Revelation and Ezekiel. In Isaiah, the author declares: “The staff that struck you, Philistines, was broken, but do not rejoice at it. Indeed, a viper will come out of the dead snake, and the viper will give birth to a flying dragon” (*Isaiah* 14:29). From a metaphorical and spiritual standpoint, this verse is rather enigmatic. First, on a metaphorical level, the stick represents all the adversities, attacks, and humiliations endured by the Jews during the decline of Israel under the reign of King Hezekiah and the Assyrian expansion. This passage could also refer to the four hundred years of suffering experienced by the Israelites in Egypt. Forced to make bricks for the construction of Pharaoh’s palaces, the people of Israel were subjected to slavery.

The prodigy child Moses, raised with privileges and honors, puts an end to the suffering of the Jews by leading the exodus to the Promised Land. This ends with the mystery of life and death—represented by the viper and the dragon, one being paradoxically the culmination of the other. However, it also undermines our Cartesian, dichotomous paradigms of existence. While seemingly fragile, ‘Life enshrined in death’ is wrapped in indestructible layers. Life that seems to be regulated by cosmic forces themselves escapes the control of the matter that encapsulates it. This is why Scott B. Noegel asserts that: “The antiquity of Leviathan and its cosmic meaning is well-known” (242) in the sense that very old texts reveal abundantly consistent interpretations of this identity of the beast, Leviathan. This interactive force transcends time, space, the senses, life, extinction, the real and the unreal. As the author of the Book of Revelation explains: “A great sign appears in the sky: it is a woman. The sun envelops it like a garment; the moon is under its feet. On her head, she wears a crown of twelve stars. She will soon give birth to a child, and the suffering of childbirth makes her scream” (*Revelation* 12: 1–2). The woman in question in this passage is impersonal, elusive, intangible, yet sensitive and emotional. Later in the same passage, this sign initially originating from a woman has become a great, mighty dragon that picks up the stars from the sky and hurls them down to the earth (*Revelation* 12: 3–4). This revelation helps us to understand Iris Idelson-Shein’s analysis who refers to disruptive clichés surrounding the definition of the monster in both ancient and

modern thought paradigms: “Thus, from ancient medicine to contemporary horror films, monstrosity has widely been assigned to the vagina, the womb, or the menstrual charge, which is often thought of as contagiously impure and to which the ability to produce monsters has also been ascribed in both Jewish and Christian lore” (38).

In his intertextual analysis of the relationship between the monsters in *Exodus* and ancient beasts, Arie C. Leder summarizes the fundamental differences between Moses and Pharaoh as follows:

Although the annual flooding of the Nile was understood as beneficial, Egypt was familiar with the threat of chaos. There, writes Keel, ‘the eve-ning darkness is above all the domain of the monstrous serpent Apophis (who)... is the embodiment of the dark sea, the evening clouds, and the morning haze—in a word, those forces which can endanger the sun at its setting in the evening and on its rising in the morning.’” (99).

In some biblical verses, there are other manifestations of the beast that open up into apocalyptic dimensions marking the end of the world. As the author of Revelation reveals:

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies gathered to make war on him who sat on the horse and his army. And the beast was taken, and with it the false prophet, who had done before him the wonders by which he deceived those who had taken the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. Both were thrown alive into the lake, burning with fire and brimstone (19: 19-20).

It is important to note the ambiguity that emerges from the association of the beast, the kings of the earth, and the false prophet. The beast here being impersonal can only be the incarnation of the evil that manifests itself through an identity, economic, social, intellectual and ecological crisis. It is in this chaotic environment of disordered values and loss of familiar landmarks that the false prophet will emerge, who appears in an insidious way, considering himself to be the only one capable of proposing solutions to crisis. This is one of the reasons why the Bible views this false prophet as the great seducer who will eventually impose his mark on all the inhabitants of the earth. Emphasizing the tactics of the beast to seduce the world in his article “The Nature of the Beast, James Shoopman affirms:”The beast goes on to seduce the world with its powers and persecutes the church. Despite fundamentalists’ insistence that they interpret the Bible literally, I have never heard anyone suggest that this means Godzilla, or something like her, arises out of the sea, either in the past or the future” (67-68). As the story is told in the Bible, no one will be able to buy and sell without this mark. This mark etched in numbers symbolizes the system in which all sectors of modern life operate. These numbers govern our life today. Our bankcards, electronic files, health records, travel documents, forms of personal identification and so on are archived, managed, and transferred by intelligent entities that go beyond our understanding. No one can assert today with certainty the amount of information collected related to his accounts without his knowledge. Are we all already carrying the number of the beast? It is impossible to be certain, but it is nonetheless true that no one is spared from the indelible imprint of the beast that has penetrated the heart of our holistic system. From the cradle to the grave, numbers saturate us. We do not know how deep we are submerged in this abyssal all-digital world. Yet, we have been warned about the rise of the beast that will subjugate us through the mark of numbers, thereby destroying the world. Some famous people have sounded the alarm. Elon Musk is one of them who is worried about the acceleration and expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI). He endeavors to pull us out of our comfort zone and to force us to think about the consequences related to the full potential of this giant beast called high technology. 2,700 years ago a prophet opened the veil giving us a glimpse of the events that will occur in conjunction with the awakening of the beast: “Sentence of the beasts of the South: Through a land of distress and anguish, where do the lioness and the lion come from, The viper and the flying dragon, They carry on their donkeys their riches, And on the hump of camels their treasures, To a people that will not be useful to them” (Isaiah 30: 6). The work of Kirsten Nielsen provides a more comprehensive prospective about the creatures found in the book of Ezekiel that enriches our understanding of these beasts. As Nielsen theorizes:

Lions, oxen and eagles transcend our human grasp. The lion, the most dangerous of all beasts of prey, is a serious threat to animals and humans alike. The ox is the strongest of all the creatures that humans can tame, while the eagle is the biggest bird of prey and can move through the air at great speed (104).

It is easy to see that Nielsen tries to show the ferocity of these animals, which is inextricably linked to their physical presence. Offering a similar interpretation, David I. Shyovitz affirms, “For classical and medieval authors, monstrous creatures were meaningful by definition—in St. Augustine’s influential formulation, the very term ‘monsters’ (monstra) ‘come[s] from the [verb] monstrare, ‘show,’ because they show [demonstrent] something by a sign” (521).

In the book of *Isaiah*, the prophet laments:

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!
 For the Lord has spoken:
 I reared children and brought them up,
 but they have rebelled against me.
 The ox knows its master,
 the donkey its owner’s manger,
 [...]
 Woe to the sinful nation,
 a people whose guilt is great,
 a brood of evildoers,
 children given to corruption!
 They have forsaken the Lord;
 They have spurned the Holy One of Israel
 And turned their backs on him.
 Why should you be beaten anymore?
 Why do you persist in rebellion?
 Your whole head is injured,
 Your whole heart afflicted.
 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head
 There is no soundness—
 Only wounds and welts
 And open sores,
 Not cleansed or bandaged
 Or soothed with olive oil (1: 1-6).

There is no need to indicate that the world has never been epitomized by such deep anxiety. All we must do is turn on the TV, surf on our smartphone, or listen to the radio to see the visible manifestation of this distress that is continuously reported to us by the news around the world. According to Revelation, the fury of the beast has descended upon mankind: “And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him, those whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Revelation 13: 8). As the author of Revelation indicates, “When they will have finished their testimony, the beast rising from the abyss will make war on them, defeat them, and kill them” (11: 7). According to the biblical, apocalyptic narrative, another divine force will try to persuade man not to venerate the beast to spare him from the deadly consequences of this adoration. This veneration transcends the spiritual realm, given that it has permeated all facets of human life.

It should be noted the growing interest of scholars who seek to discern the symbolism of the beast. For instance, Guy Williams expresses an interest in Jewish literature intended to instill moral virtues through animals: “A related tendency of ancient Jewish writings was to moralize strongly with wild animals. They could be not simply wild, but wicked. So, we encounter such phrases in the Bible as ‘an evil wild beast’ (Gen. 37:20) or, ‘any evil beast’ (Isa. 35:9) 46.” The images of animals such as snake, lion, bear, dragon are disseminated throughout the Bible in a multiform of monsters that live in the

nature but also can be manifested in the spiritual realm. In the Bible, the books of *Daniel* and *Ezekiel* depict these beasts and monsters in the philosophical standpoint. Their presence reflects the complex world in which the humankind is evolving. It may also indicate the crossing point between mythical forces that we have named spirit, monster, beast, or dragon.

Mississippi State University, USA

Works Cited

- Backus, Irena Dorota. “The Beast: Interpretations of Daniel 7.2-9 and Apocalypse 13.1-4, 11-12 in Lutheran, Zwinglian and Calvinist Circles in the Late Sixteenth Century.” *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, vol. 3, June 2000, pp. 59–77.
- David I. Shyovitz. “Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Werewolf Renaissance.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2014, p. 521.
- De Villiers, Pieter G. R. “Prime Evil and Its Many Faces in the Book of Revelation.” *Neotestamentica*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2000, pp. 57–85.
- Fox, Michael V. “God’s Answer and Job’s Response.” *Biblica*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–23.
- Gardner, Anne E. “Decoding Daniel: The Case of Dan 7,5.” *Biblica*, vol. 88, no. 2, 2007, pp. 222–233.
- Goswell, Greg (Gregory Ross). “The Visions of Daniel and Their Historical Specificity.” *Restoration Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2016, pp. 129–142.
- Iris Idelson-Shein. *The Monstrous Mames: Mapping the Margins of Maternity in Early Modern Jewish Discourse*. no. 3, 2015, p. 37.
- Jefferson, Lee M. “The Staff of Jesus in Early Christian Art.” *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2010, pp. 221–251. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1163/156852910X494411.
- John B. Geyer. “Desolation and Cosmos.” *Vetus Testamentum*, no. 1, 1999, p. 49.
- Jones, Scott C. “Corporeal Discourse in the Book of Job.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 132, no. 4, 2013, pp. 845–863.
- Jones, Scott C. “Lions, Serpents, and Lion-Serpents in Job 28:8 and Beyond.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 130, no. 4, Winter 2011, pp. 663–686.
- Kvanvig, Helge S. “Throne Visions and Monsters: The Encounter between Danielic and Enochic Traditions.” *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 117, no. 2, 2005, pp. 249–272.
- Steven J. Friesen. “Myth and Symbolic Resistance in Revelation 13.” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, no. 2, 2004, p. 281.
- Leder, Arie C. “Hearing Exodus 7:8-13 to Preach the Gospel: The Ancient Adversary in Today’s World.” *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1, Apr. 2008, pp. 93–110.
- Lienhard, Joseph T. “Origen: On First Principles.” *First Things*, vol. 288, Dec. 2018, pp. 52–54.
- Michael V. Fox. “Behemoth and Leviathan.” *Biblica*, no. 2, 2012, p. 261.
- Nielsen, Kirsten. “Ezekiel’s Visionary Call as Prologue: From Complexity and Changeability to Order and Stability?” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol. 33, no. 1, Sept. 2008, pp. 99–114.
- Noegel, S. B. *Jonah and Leviathan: Inner-Biblical Allusions and the Problem with Dragons*. Vol. 37, Editrice Morcelliana Srl. EBSCOhost. Accessed 1 June 2019.
- Shoopman, James. “The Nature of the Beast.” *Review & Expositor*, vol. 106, no. 1, 2009, pp. 67–82.
- Snyder, Graydon F. “Sea Monsters in Early Christian Art.” *Biblical Research*, vol. 44, 1999, pp. 7–21. *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. San Diego, CA: Thunder Bay Press, 2000.
- Williams, Guy. “An Apocalyptic and Magical Interpretation of Paul’s ‘Beast Fight’ in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32).” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 57, no. 1, Apr. 2006, pp. 42–56.