

God's Monsters. By Esther J. Hamori. Minneapolis, MI: Broadleaf Books, 2023. 296 pp. Hardcover \$28.99; Kindle \$20.49.

Superhuman beings have long fascinated people, and Esther Hamori's entry into the biblical subject seeks to expose the dark side of these creatures, and of God Himself, in a book that Bart Ehrman calls, "a godsend" (cover). It is through this vantage point that readers will have to sift in order to find a few moments of edification due to the darkness of both the material and the author's viewpoint. Hamori alerts the reader to this point of view in her introductory chapter: "Monsters of the Bible can indeed demonstrate something about the nature of the biblical God. But be prepared: God's nature isn't always so benevolent. In fact, this God may be the monster of monsters" (7).

The material is divided into three major sections: first, the heavenly entourage of God with chapters on Seraphim, Cherubim, The Adversary, The Destroyer and Other Angels, Demons in God's Ranks, and Manipulative & Mind-Altering Spirits; secondly, the earthly monsters including the Sea Monster, Shades, Ghosts, and Other Living Dead; and then finally God, who the author refers to as "the God-monster" (261). The book is based upon material from a class that Hamori has long taught at Union Seminary in NY called "Monster Heaven," and with copious sarcasm and numerous references to popular horror movies, she desires her reader to see that "The Bible has been domesticated, muzzling its monsters" (10).

One of the strengths of the book is the way it de-sanitizes popular misconceptions of angelic beings. Her chapter on the Cherubim addresses their infantilization: "Cherubim are imagined now as happy, fat angel-babies. To the writers of the Bible, this image would be unrecognizable" (41). Her accounting of the story of Job pulls no punches, reminding the reader that "there's no softening the loss of ten children" (90), and enabling her audience to feel the bleakness of the innocent sufferer's dilemma: "He's subjected to his friends' unremitting affirmations of the divine message that God doesn't cause the innocent to suffer (but he did!) and so Job must have brought this on himself (but he didn't!)" (191) (parentheses in the original).

Unfortunately, the book suffers from several weaknesses. First is the myopic way the work seeks to compartmentalize these monsters and horrors, isolating them from the greater narrative. Yes, the Bible is full of many awful events and individuals, but the bigger picture of Scripture helps make sense of it. Hamori presents Bible accounts in a way that prevents the reader from seeing this. For instance, in her examination of the Cherubim and her recounting of the Garden of Eden narrative, she states, "When God realizes things haven't unfolded as he expected, he curses everyone in his path...He's like Walter White in *Breaking Bad* putting down everyone who sees through his innocent facade...In a disturbingly typical abuser move, God shows just enough care to keep the people convinced of his love, making them clothing and even dressing them himself. This tender act is almost enough to make you forget that he just lied to them about their lives being in danger ...He even alters the story: he misquotes himself to Adam...God has just gaslighted the first humans" (pp. 45-46). By breezing over the significance of the clothing God made for Adam and Eve (an innocent, bloody, substitutionary sacrifice to

cover their shame) and making reference neither to the protoevangelium nor the statements of Adam and Eve, the redemptive narrative is muzzled, even mutilated. Another example is Isaiah 6 wherein she recounts the story of the Seraphim but never so much as alludes to what Isaiah or the heavenly beings say about what just happened with the live coal being put to the prophet's mouth. Of course, soteriology is not the focus of her study, but nonetheless this practice of cherry picking monstrosities throughout the book amounts merely to a catalog of the sensational as one awful act is listed after another. If Hamori's emphasis is how the Bible is meant to be read, one wonders how it ever came to be cherished by so many, including her own ancestors.

A second weakness which some readers may not find helpful is the tone with which God is addressed. Certainly, both testaments are filled with the honest, unfiltered struggles of God's people as they grapple with the problem of why God allows suffering and the mystery of evil, but Hamori's work is supersaturated with sarcasm directed at the Almighty, which perhaps will be of little devotional, theological, or homiletic value to many. She is wont to use phrases such as, "God's anger management issues aside" (18), "the Godfather sends his heavies to do his dirty work" (21), "God intentionally harming his people" (24), "in this analogy God's the wife beater" (26), "God lied and the snake told the truth" (45), "Ongoing teamwork between God and Satan" (100), and "In the final verses of the New Testament, it is written that no one who practices falsehood will enter the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:27; 22:15). This could pose a problem for the Almighty" (200), among many others.

A third, though minor, weakness the book has is that it requires the reader to be familiar with scores of horror movie references and television shows. Undoubtedly Hollywood has been drawing inspiration from the Bible for over a century (presumably without paying royalties to the author) but each chapter contains so many references that the reader will have to brush up on his TV binging if he hopes to understand each illustration.

The book also has flashes of higher criticism, open theism, and a bit of politics. There are also some interpretive oddities, such as when dealing with the topic of the Adversary, Hamori omits any reference whatsoever to Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, without an endnote as to why these traditionally significant passages are left out of the discussion. And regarding the Seraphim, she argues strongly but not convincingly that the fiery serpents of Numbers 21 are the exact same beings seen in Isaiah 6, though the Hebrew terms are not exactly the same.

One final significant point to bring up is that in her introduction Hamori briefly reflects on the effect the tragic death of her brother had on her. "His death, and my sense of a world spinning out, off its axis, without order, propelled me into a long period of religious exploration, turning over a variety of ideas before finding my way back home to Judaism, the tradition I grew up in" (9). The reader could be left with the impression that the author's world continues to be disordered and off center. She concludes "the Bible isn't a solution to the struggles of life, but a reflection of them" (271). If there is nothing more to God's monsters than this, the reader will be left longing for a sequel wherein God is not a monster only, but also a Father.