Heather Macumber, *Recovering the Monstrous in Revelation*

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Recovering the Monstruous in Revelation offers a thematic reading of John's Apocalypse. Rather than focusing on one specific exegetical passage or zeroing in on a theological topic, the author combs the book for its references to the monstrous. The author starts by underlining what I consider the most original contribution of the monograph: a deconstruction of how traditional exegesis has associated the monster with evil and the divine with goodness. It seems impossible to conjure up the monster without immediately attributing some ethical valence to it. Macumber deconstructs in Revelation this equation of monstrous with evil, undoing, blurring, erasing the frontiers on both sides. Not only does such ethical binarism not map onto the complexity of Revelation, but the very nature of the division Monster/God calls for further complexity: many of Revelation's godly images absorb the qualities of the monster and much of the monstrous copycats' divine attributes.

The monster is the "other," both internal and external, a hybrid and ambiguous literary figure that skips clear definitions and is deployed for a wide variety of purposes: community formation, political antagonism, and theological positionings. However, one of the hermeneutical problems resides in the difficulty of establishing the definitional features of the monster. Inspired by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Macumber poses the question of who the real monster is. Is it the creature whose actions the reader abhors, or is it the scientist who abandons his creation? Who holds the moral high ground? Such questions constitute an undercurrent of the whole book, putting a new spin on traditional takes on Revelation. Macumber reads Revelation's genre and author as ambiguous, much like the monster: "Like the monsters it describes, the book is also a hybrid being, one caught up between typical and expected literary genres" (3).

Chapter one introduces monster theory and defines the features that identify the monster as a liminal and hybrid figure. The monster is both the "other" and the one too close to us. The author explores the assumed negatives of hybridity and, rejecting ideas from Leviticus that associate mixing elements with impurity (15-17), argues that "[h]ybridity is a central feature for divine entities that appear in John's Apocalypse," regardless of whether they are viewed positively or negatively by John or later interpreters (12). The emphasis is on deconstructing the facile equation between the monster and evil: "designating something as monstrous is not a moral judgment but only an identification of that being's otherness, danger, and excessive nature." (17).

John's allegedly anti-imperial strategy, a standard take in most recent scholarship on Revelation, gets caught up in imperial dynamics as he participates in the same stigmatizing project. The conceptualization of the monster as "other"—its hybridity and liminality—invites a series of postcolonial reflections, inspired mainly by Homi Bhabha and further developed in chapter two, about the shifting cultural identity of John–as an author and literary character moving between diasporic Judaism and

colonial rule– and how such context determines his presentation of the heavenly realm: ultimately the monstrous is not located exclusively in the abyss, but it is also installed in the heavenly court, heavily populated by hybrid and liminal creatures.

Chapter two advances an understanding of community formation whereby John's antagonizing worldview, particularly his strategy to vilify any opposition, places him in the realm of the monstrous. This chapter introduces postcolonialism as a supplement to monster theory to explore John and Jezebel as hybrid and liminal figures. On this front, I find the author's contribution particularly original: Is John a monster? Although he has no horns, he is a creature of excess sitting at the border of the human and the divine. His privileged position as narrator lends credence to his construction of Jezebel as a monster. It is the task of monster and postcolonial theory, however, to warn the interpreter about this othering dynamic and rehearse an interpretation where the hate for Jezebel is deconstructed. Monster theory shows that in the process of making Jezebel a monster, John becomes a monster himself.

In Chapter three, Macumber argues that the divine and its allies are monstrous or monster-like. Macumber summarizes: "Understanding God as a monster breaks down preconceptions of how the divine relates to humanity and other cosmic creatures. It challenges the well-known metaphors of father or shepherd and instead privileges the mystery of the divine over the familiar and safe" (48). The emphasis on God's anthropomorphic and chrematomorphic dimensions allows for a fresh take on traditional Christological titles. Rather than understanding the Lamb/Lion metaphors as representing meekness/violence, Macumber notices the feelings of terror induced in the audience considering the Lamb's wrath (Rev 6:16-17). This is a productive hermeneutical strategy that conceives of Christ as a shapeshifter, oscillating between divinity and monstrosity, terror, and comfort. When we apply the category of the monster to the divine figures, we realize that the terror created is "exponentially greater than that of the Dragon and the beasts … In his attempt to show that God and Jesus are mighty opponents to the Dragon and the beasts, John's portrayals of these heavenly beings are uncanny in their resemblance to Roman imperial powers" (65-66). The classic *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Mircea Eliade) has political overtones.

Chapter four explores the fear instilled by the divine, in this case embodied in the angelophany. In alignment with the theoretical drive to blur good/evil, divine/monstrous borders, Macumber studies the divine military as monstrous. I find this unsettling of the distinction between monstrous and divine hermeneutically rich: for instance, the hybridization of the locusts (Revelation 9) installs the monstrous within God's army while complicating the facile association of the monstrous with evil.

Chapter five focuses on the Red Dragon (Revelation 12). Macumber interprets the dragon as a warning figure against assimilation into imperial Rome and as a mirror image of the godly creatures: "Though the uncanny similarities between the Dragon and God are often dismissed as parody, it is more likely than this mimicry arises from their similar identities and presentations as monstrous creatures" (102). Here we attend to a mapping of the spatial wanderings of the Red Dragon: initially able to cross divine-earthly boundaries, it finally is confined to the lake of fire with the beast and the false prophet. Macumber notices that one of the monster's features is that it always returns. For instance, in 20:1-3, after the imprisonment in the Abyss, it returns in 20:8 by gathering an army from the corners of the earth.

Chapter six tackles the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth in Revelation 13. The author balances an interpretation where the traditional links between Revelation and the Hebrew Bible's apocalyptic traditions (most notably Daniel) align with the monograph's focus. The monsters and the Lamb share numerous features: both have mortal wounds, both have their "armies," and both members' armies are tattooed on their foreheads. Their function, however, is entirely opposite. Macumber fittingly names these "monsters of prohibition" because they are created as an outer limit to the community and, as such, they police communal belonging. Are these monsters annihilated or subjected to eternal torture? Although "the tendency is to read the coming of the New Jerusalem as the end of evil and chaos," Macumber notices, "John leaves the door open to this question" (136). The indeterminacy of the monstrous also affects its final triumph.

Chapter seven focuses on the Woman Babylon as an abject creature. On the now long-standing debate on understanding Babylon in Revelation 17-18 as a misogynistic text (Schüssler-Fiorenza vs. Keller), Macumber sides with the postmodern approach, looking at how John's rhetoric "is intended to dehumanize." (143). Macumber situates John's treatment of Babylon within a broader gendered system whereby women tend to stand for the "other." As such, Macumber details the features that John attaches to Babylon: drunken, a prostitute, a courtesan, promiscuous, and impure. Macumber's significant contribution is blurring the ethical distinctions scholars have attached to Babylon. She writes: "A key thesis of this book is that the monster cannot be automatically equated with evil or chaos, though they are potentially dangerous entities. However, too often, the actions of divine beings like God and the Lamb are excused even when they demonstrate their similarly dangerous and threatening natures" (159). In this case, ambivalence manifests in the possible reaction of the reader, who might, in the end, feel pity (together with disgust) for the fallen Babylon.

I situate *Recovering the Monstrous in Revelation* within the current political and ethical takes on Revelation. Siding with postmodern approaches that interpret the book as replicating imperial dynamics, Macumber offers an introductory text that, first, acknowledges and converses with the most recent scholarly interpretations and, second, forces us to question the ethical labels that attach to players depending on whether they occupy the divine or monstrous realms. In my view, this is a contribution that would fit best in an introductory course (to Revelation or the New Testament in general) seeking to expose students to recent developments in literary theory and its impact on biblical hermeneutics.

Reference List

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Keller, Catherine. 1996. *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World.* Boston: Beacon Press.

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