

**Esther J. Hamori, *God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible*. Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023. 296 pp, hardcover. \$28.99.**

In *God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible* (henceforth *GM*), Hamori skillfully and even playfully navigates the dark humor and grotesque tales found throughout the Bible. Sometimes creepy, sometimes surprising, but almost always disturbing, Hamori examines episodes from both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, covering a range of time periods, languages, and fields of expertise.

Instead of losing readers in scholarly jargon, Hamori's accessible—not to mention witty, sharp, and sometimes sarcastic—writing style invites her audience to think *alongside* her. The bluntness she brings is purposeful and in line with the goals of the book. It is clear, and refreshingly so, that *GM* was designed with learning in mind. Indeed, it began as a class that Hamori teaches at Union Theological seminary titled “Monster Heaven.” In the process of reviewing a work such as this, I've been inspired by Hamori's writing style and attempted to follow suit throughout my comments here.

Before turning to the structure and details of the work, it's worth emphasizing that *GM* is just as much about monsters as it is about monstrous violence. How much divine violence is acceptable? And what do our limits tell us about our own loyalties, to a deity or otherwise? Hamori's “monstrous readings” are important for both scholars and non-scholars alike and are disarming for any theologically encumbered view. To add to the author's own boundary-crossing approach, Hamori blends the sacred and profane by inserting pop-culture references in every section. Indeed, *Jaws* and *Poltergeist* share the same pages with angels and Leviathan.

Divided into three parts that each address a different category of monster in the Bible, *GM* covers a wide scope of creatures. From the well-known divine hybrids in the throne room to the Destroyer who murders the firstborn children of Egypt, Hamori manages to work through an incredible amount of biblical material without overcrowding. But don't misunderstand: the sheer amount of violent material with which she has to work with *is* overwhelming. And in that way, Hamori maintains a tension for her readers, one that oscillates between utter shock and insatiable curiosity.

Part one comprises more than half of the book and discusses the horrifying entities in what she calls “God's entourage.” She begins with the beings that people perhaps feel most confident that they know something about: the familiar seraphim, cherubim, and the adversary. But then come the creatures that readers will likely be less acquainted with, including the destroyer, demons employed by God, and spirits that are not quite what they seem.

Hamori navigates both popular (like Job) and less discussed (David and his census) stories in the Bible, and offers new perspectives on the characters that readers may think they know so well. Moreover, *GM* highlights the relationship dynamics between God and his monsters, which reveal just as much as the character biopics themselves. One example of these dynamics is the “history of working as a team” shared between God and the Adversary as shown in the Balaam incident, Job's trial, Zechariah's vision of the high priest Joshua, and the two versions of David's census.

In addition to fresh readings, Hamori contributes insightful alternatives to long-held assumptions in biblical studies circles. One example from her discussion on cherubim undoes their association with primordial creation and the Edenic paradise. The cherubim's presence in

both the Tabernacle and Temple of Solomon has been largely grouped in with scholars' emphasis on these sacred spaces as creation centered: the garden of God on earth. But Hamori corrects this association by demonstrating that the cherubim's purpose is always about guardianship.<sup>1</sup> This guardian function of cherubim is not new, but its explicit reiteration as guarding the violent portal (the ark of the covenant) that unleashes death and destruction most certainly is.

Divine hitmen—also known as angels—stand out in Hamori's discussion as particularly frightening. They are realm-crossers and shapeshifters, and incite fear in every single person they encounter. Furthermore, Hamori demonstrates that killer-angels aren't just limited to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. They show up in Acts, the Gospels, and Paul's letters—not to mention the infamous book of Revelation—without discrimination. Periodically, Hamori offers psycho-theological insight as to why devotionally-inclined readers continue to accept the terror and violence in their sacred texts without question. Our loyalty to and defense of angels, she argues, perhaps comes from our identification with angels as the most human-like and the possibility of their protection at some point.<sup>2</sup> But in the end, angels are neutral mercenaries who obey their employer, whether it be the army of Satan or the army of God.

In the section immediately following angels, *GM* turns to demons and demon-like figures throughout the Bible including Dever (Pestilence), Qetev (Destruction), Mavet (Death) and more. Unlike angels, these characters have no other purpose than do harm (their names are them and they are their names), which is why a text like Psalm 91 was and continues to be popular as a protective charm against them. God vanquishes each of them, showing his supremacy over them. But then Hamori delivers the disconcerting blow. However much English translations attempt to obscure these Canaanite mythological parallels, each of these entities are later *deployed* by God himself. Demons, then, are not exempt from being drafted into the divine army.

Part two, albeit much shorter than the previous, is titled “The Monsters Beneath” and covers only three monster categories, each of which exist below the surface in some form or another. For the multi-headed Leviathan, the depths of the sea are both its abode and its battleground. It is simultaneously defeated and beloved, and receives an homage in Job 41 that Hamori likens to the poetry of Song of Songs, “an expression of intimate knowledge and passionate love.”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this reading is about God's loyalty to and admiration of Leviathan's wildness, power, and untamable monstrosity—qualities that we've seen the Bible's god-monster embody over and over.

The other two monster categories are those that traverse the underworld (shades, ghosts, and other living dead) and those that unnaturally reach above it (giants). So, what's the “beneath” about these creatures? They both reflect—in the classic psycho-social understanding of what a monster is—humanity's underlying fears and anxieties. Being disembodied and forgotten in Sheol “reveals a deep discomfort with the notion of a hollow nothingness awaiting us all,”<sup>4</sup> whereas the category of giants becomes a slur for indigenous, “monstrous” others against whom we'd like to justify acts of divinely-approved violence. Part two, in many ways, makes explicit what Hamori has been implying all along. Monsters and monsterization in the Bible are not

---

<sup>1</sup> Esther J. Hamori, *God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Hamori, *God's Monsters*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> Hamori, *God's Monster*, 221.

<sup>4</sup> Hamori, *God's Monsters*, 239.

innocuous: they have real-life consequences and bear a violent legacy that biblical readers cannot ignore.

By the time one reaches part three—“The Monster of Monsters, the Wonder of Wonders”—an attentive reader will have picked up on the book’s underlying thread. If the saying is true that “you become the average of the five people you hang out with most,” then God in the company of his monstrous entourage is a troubling one. But God is not only guilty by association. The God in the Bible also checks a number of the boxes on the monster checklist such as having super-size, superpowers, varying forms, and his desire to be the literal embodiment of fear and terror. These monster qualities, Hamori reminds us, are intertwined with the feel-good narratives of love, patience, and mercy, painting a wondrously complicated divine image.

But what makes for a good story if not often its complex characters? They’re sympathetic, complicated, have weaknesses, and are often flawed, prompting a reader to question their own perspectives and loyalties. We despise the Riddler in *The Batman* (2022) for his twisted and murderous acts, but then sympathize with his psychological trauma as an orphan and fight for the underdogs. In Hamori’s words, monsters aren’t just about fear and terror; they’re also about “shaking our sense that we know what our world contains.”<sup>5</sup> And in this way, the god-monster of the Bible stands firmly in this category.

For future studies, *GM* offers a number of promising contributions. Monster studies and animal studies will find countless points to build on, but other implications may be less obvious. For example, reading *GM* with a polytheistic worldview in mind has the potential to unravel the hegemonic monotheism-lens through which readers interpret biblical texts writ large. God alongside his monsters—such as the gods of the Canaanite pantheons—is really a god among gods fighting for supremacy, uniqueness, and a chance to write *his* own story. But as Xenophanes of Colophon posited, “if horses or oxen or lions had hands. . .horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen.” Perhaps, then, the authors of the Bible wrote the god-monster according to their own complicated view of the world and themselves.

If one can stay unoffended at Hamori’s fresh readings, they may be inspired like I was as at every chapter’s turn. The stuff of *God’s Monsters* makes for some of the best dinner conversations, if you can stomach it.

Megan Remington, University of California, Los Angeles

---

<sup>5</sup> Hamori, *God’s Monsters*, 103.