

Monsters, Dragons, Serpents, oh my!

by Andy Patton

In his book, *Into the Woods*, John Yorke makes the argument that every story is basically *Jaws*. Think about it. A dangerous monster threatens a community until one human takes it upon himself to slay the monster and restore peace to the community. Sound familiar? It is the plot of hundreds of Hollywood blockbusters. It is also a primary plot of the Bible.

Have you ever wondered why so many of God's enemies are described with snake-like language? Or what the deal is with the references to monsters (think of Job's leviathan, or Revelation's dragon, or Daniel's beasts from the sea)? Or why was it a serpent that came to tempt the first humans in Genesis 3? Or even what Paul meant when he said that our true battle was not with flesh and blood but with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm (Ephesians 6:12)?

You may have noticed that not all spiritual beings in the Bible are "the good guys." The Bible uses all kinds of images to talk about the spiritual forces of evil: serpents, dragons, sea monsters, and other creatures of chaos. Ultimately, the plot reveals the snake-crushing Savior, Jesus, who comes to put an end to the monster and its influence in the world.

If that comes as a surprise, you are not alone! The Bible, like all great literature, is subtle. But something is being said in all this monster imagery that is important to get our heads around. This language reveals an important but hidden dimension of what is really going on "behind the scenes" in the biblical story. And it paints an even bigger picture of what Jesus was up to—one he consistently tried to get people to see.

Enter the Monster

These monsters appear on page one of the Bible in the epic creation narrative. Genesis 1:21 says that on the fifth day, God "created the great sea creatures." This is saying more than just, "God made whales and other big fish." The word translated "great sea creatures" is *tannin*, which can mean "dragon," "serpent," or "sea monster." The word carries the connotation of evil and chaos throughout Scripture.

Why does the author seem nonchalant about this sea monster? To understand why, we need to remember every culture has stories and myths that shape the way that culture sees itself and the world. At this point in the story, a good question to ask would be, "What stories did Israel's neighbors tell about the creation event?"

Babylon was one of Israel's most powerful ancient neighbors, and every good Babylonian knew that the world was created when the chief Babylonian god, Marduk, battled an ancient sea monster, Tiamat. In the myth, Marduk killed Tiamat and used the creature's body to make the heavens and the earth. Quite the violent beginning.

In Genesis, however, there is something very different going on. By depicting the chaotic sea monsters as God's creation, Genesis is showing that God has complete authority and rule over even the darkest powers.

But if God is so dominant over the monsters of evil and chaos, why is there so much evil in the world?

Fair question. On page three of the Bible, an answer begins to develop.

In Genesis 3 we are introduced to a new character, the serpent (*nachash*). What do we know about this serpent? First, he is bad news. This is a creature who is on mission to disrupt God's good, ordered world—a chaos monster. The serpent is the Bible's first portrayal of evil and independence from God. From this point on, when the authors want to talk about evil, they use serpent and dragon imagery.

Second, the serpent's own chaos-mission isn't enough; he also tries to persuade others to join. The first humans take the bait, and a pattern is established: spiritual rebellion behind human rebellion; spiritual powers behind earthly evil.

But God promises that though humanity will be oppressed by the serpent, one day a snake-crushing savior will come and deliver God's people (Genesis 3:15). Despite this rebellion, God still rules his creation and is always acting to restore peace and justice to it.

After just three pages of the Bible, we've landed on the primary plot conflict of the biblical story. Disaster always results when humans, who are meant to rule creation as partners with their Creator, join instead with the monster's rebellion against him. How will God ultimately defeat this monster as promised? Let's explore the rest of the Bible to find out.

God's Power Over The Prowling Monster in the Old Testament

The Bible uses monster imagery all over the place to depict God's power over evil and to describe the spiritual forces of evil that instigate and energize human evil. Here are a few key examples:

Moses' Staff

In the first chapters of the book of Exodus, the stage is set for a confrontation between God's people and the evil empire, Egypt. God commissions Moses to partner with him, but Moses has cold feet. He asks what to do if people don't believe him. God gives him a miraculous sign, a transforming staff, to show that God is with him. What does God transform the staff into? A sword? A scepter? A lightning bolt? No. The staff becomes a serpent, and at Moses' touch, it becomes a staff again.

This is a subtle clue that the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is not just happening on an earthly level. Spiritual combatants are involved. God is rescuing his people from slavery to the Egyptians, but he is also saving them from the power of the serpent—that ancient force of evil.

The Leviathan in the Psalms

In the Psalms, you occasionally get strange references to God overcoming sea monsters. For example, Psalm 74 says: "*You divided the sea by your might and broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan...*" (vv. 13-14).

Remember where we started? Every story is the plot of *Jaws*? Here God is the hero who fights back against the monster from the sea and divides the water to clear a space for order and life (again echoing Genesis 1).

Judgment on the Dragon

The prophets carry this image even further. When Isaiah wants to remind the Israelites that God has enough power to protect them from their enemies, what image does he choose? The sea monster. Isaiah writes, "Was it not [God] who cut the sea monster into pieces, who pierced the dragon?" (Isaiah 51:9)

Ezekiel uses the same imagery for a different purpose when he says, "Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon..." (Ezekiel 29:3)

Ezekiel isn't just calling names; the term dragon is intentional. He is drawing a connection between the earthly kingdoms and the evil powers in rebellion against God's kingdom. There is a dark power behind Pharaoh's earthly throne, the very monster all this imagery has been describing.

So, the Old Testament depicts powerful spiritual forces of evil and God's continued confrontation of this evil. But it doesn't seem like we have arrived at a resolution of the conflict from Genesis 1-3.

Jesus Faces Down the Satan

In his ministry, Jesus carries forward God's purpose to defeat evil. We finally arrive at the point of the movie when the hero takes it upon himself to slay the monster! How will Jesus, our hero, take on this task?

First, Jesus acknowledges the reality of our broken world, using the same Old Testament monstrous imagery to talk about an evil figure prowling behind the scenes of everyday events. But instead of talking about sea monsters or dragons, he used another, lesser-known title from the Hebrew Scriptures: *the satan*.

Today, we often think of "Satan" as a proper name, but it is actually a description. It means "the adversary."

The satan attacks Jesus the moment his ministry begins. Just after his baptism, filled with the Spirit, Jesus walks out into the wilderness to face down his enemy. It is the temptation from the snake in Genesis 3 all over again, but with a different result. The satan tempts Jesus to summon the power that is rightfully his by seizing independence just like the first humans. It is as if the tempter is saying, "There is another way than God's way." Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy and gives the answer Adam and Eve should have given: "There is only God's way."

At this point in the story, the battle has just begun. Jesus' adversary appears over and over in the pages of the Gospels. Jesus' words about him show that he thought the satan was a real character, not just a symbol of evil. Jesus describes how the satan demanded that he might "have" Peter in order to "sift him like wheat" (Luke 22:31). He also said that he saw the satan fall like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18). In a parable, Jesus said that sometimes when people hear his words, the satan comes along and interferes, so that his words don't take root (Mark 4:15). In a dramatic argument with Jesus' opponents, he tells them they are "children of the devil, who was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). True to his words, they pick up stones and try to kill him. The Gospel writers depict the satan's hand even in the death of Jesus. Just before Jesus is betrayed, the satan "enters Judas," who then hurries out to summon the very people who will put Jesus to death.

Then something unexpected happens. In the climactic event, Jesus is killed at the hands of the monster's minions. But in dying, he slays the monster. N. T. Wright puts it this way: "The violent death of the lamb has won the decisive victory over the monsters and their horrid kingdoms and over the old dragon, the satan himself."

In killing the Son of God, the satan brings about his own destruction. God's people escape and the monster's power is broken because the snake-crushing Messiah is himself crushed and broken. The writer of Hebrews explains this strange deliverance when he says that Jesus took on flesh so that "through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those that through the fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:14-15). His resurrection three days later showed that Jesus' death was really a victory because now the snake-crusher has become the King (Ephesians 1:20).

The Dragon's End

Wait a second. If Jesus beat the monster when he died and was raised again, why is there still so much evil in the world?

Perhaps that is the very question people were asking around the time John was writing the book of Revelation. After all, decades had passed since Jesus' resurrection, and his followers were being persecuted by enemies on every side. In Revelation, John gives an answer to the question and a reason to hope in the midst of the monster's evil. Revelation is written in the apocalyptic style, a type of ancient literature that uses a collage of symbols to communicate meanings. Because so many of its ideas are communicated in imagery, it can be hard to understand. It can also give unusually vivid portrayals and

mysterious glimpses of what is really going on in the heavenly realm. And its message about the fate of the monstrous enemy, the Bible's great villain, is a hopeful one.

In Revelation, the monster is not a slithering serpent but a mighty dragon.

The dragon launches his rebellion against God and is thrown down to the earth to continue his war against God's people. A loud voice from heaven proclaims that though the adversary "accuses [God's people] day and night," they have "conquered him through the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 12:1-6). Because Jesus conquered the monster, now his people are conquerors.

Though the battle continues, its ending is certain. In fact, in the climax of the Book of Revelation, John has a vision of the monster's destiny when "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and the satan" is bound and cast out of the new creation forever (Revelation 20:1-3).