

**The Good, The God, and The Ugly:
The Role of the Beloved Monster in the Ancient Near East
and the Hebrew Bible**

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“Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge, his speech is fire, his breath is death...Enlil made it his destiny to be the terror of the people.”¹

Introduction: Hero, Master, Monster

From sacred scripture to speculative fiction, from folktales to *Frankenstein*, humans have always had monsters on the mind. They come in many shapes and sizes, enjoying a spotlight in stories told by disparate cultures throughout different eras. Still, they are recognizable: we know a monster when we see one. Analyzing both literature and film, Noël Carroll suggests that the fundamental characteristic of monsters is category violation.² From gremlins to ghosts to Godzilla, monsters are mixed up—simultaneously one creature and another, one state of being and another, familiar and unfamiliar, self and other. The breakdown of such ordered categories is source of great anxiety, so monsters always threaten more than just physical harm. Although the category violation ends in the minds of the monster’s observer, playing upon some social or psychological fear, it begins with the monster’s form. Monsters are hybrid beings that threaten human existence through the violation of culturally determined categories.

1 Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* II: 221–22, 228. Translation and lineation follow A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) unless otherwise noted.

2 Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 31–35.

This holds true for ancient monsters as well as modern. One of Mesopotamia's most famous monsters is Humbaba, from the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.³ He is the first great opponent of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the *Epic*'s mortal, dynamic duo. A popular figure in Mesopotamia, Humbaba is known within and without this text for his "unusual physiognomy":⁴ he breathes fire;⁵ he is "strange of visage";⁶ he is armored with the terrifying radiance of the gods. In omen texts and in visual representations, Humbaba is anthropomorphic, but his face resembles a grotesque mass of intestines,⁷ and he may have leonine claws and whiskers.⁸ In addition to a physiologically mixed being, Humbaba threatens humanity as an existentially mixed being; he is the guardian of a sacred forest, straddling the divide between civilization and wilderness. As the *Epic* simply states, it is "his destiny to be the terror of the people."⁹

But monsters are not always solely the objects of horror. Their essential uncanniness makes them fascinating, and is what keeps them in our imaginations. For many modern monsters, fascination blossoms into sympathy, and they are portrayed as representative victims of humanity's cruelty. Ancient audiences, on the other hand, are not likely to sympathize with monsters, which are portrayed as cosmic threats—villains rather than victims. However, there are ancient texts in which an evil monster is viewed favorably by another, otherwise good, character. These texts depict what I describe as the "beloved monster motif," in which a hero battles an antagonistic monster who nevertheless enjoys a favorable relationship with a high god.

Let us again consider Humbaba. He is physically grotesque, undeniably evil, and a threat to civilization. Yet the epic tells us that he was installed as forest guardian by none other than

3 Called "Huwawa" in the earlier Sumerian poems.

4 George, *Gilgamesh*, 145.

5 *EG* II: 221.

6 Old Babylonian *EG* III: 193.

7 George, *Gilgamesh*, 146; Benjamin R. Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation, Analogues, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001), 41.

8 Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 106.

9 *EG* II: 228.

Enlil, a chief deity in the Mesopotamian pantheon. Enlil is not a villain, but it was this god who made Humbaba's destiny to be the terror of the people. While hated, feared, and opposed by the heroes, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the monster Humbaba is "beloved" of the high god, Enlil. It might seem strange that the hero and the high god should have conflicting responses to the monster. Indeed it is, but this beloved monster motif, I will argue, plays a critical role in ancient Near Eastern mythology.

One function of myth is to provide dramatic justification for a deity's status, explaining through narrative how the gods took their places in the cosmic order.¹⁰ A god's cosmic position reflects the importance of his or her real world cult, and of the institutions that god represents. For religious or political reasons, worshipers of a certain deity may wish to expand their patron god's influence. To do so, they must give the promotion a mythic framework in which their god becomes superior over others. One way for upstart deities to surpass their elders and betters is through direct combat. The second millennium Mesopotamian *Theogony of Dunnu*, for example, sees creation unfold according to a "monthly schedule of family violence," where each generation of gods murders and assumes the authority of their progenitors, only to be killed in turn by their successors.¹¹ The victims in this myth have no real world cult, so their deaths do not disturb the cosmos or the religious landscape. Major deities, on the other hand, have established cults and rich mythological traditions; they cannot simply be killed to make way for a heroic upstart god. Likewise, a god on the rise cannot violently depose a celebrated cosmic king and still be called a hero. The promotion of a god to a higher status poses a serious problem to existing religious practice and tradition.

10 This fits a definition of myth given by Paul Ricoeur as a "narrative of origins" that replies to any number of questions, e.g.: "How did a particular society come to exist? What is the sense of this institution? Why does this event or that rite exist? Why are certain things forbidden? What legitimizes a particular authority?" Paul Ricoeur, "Myth: Myth and History," *ER* 9:6371–80.

11 Stephanie Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 278–81.

One solution to this problem is the beloved monster motif. If a given worldview cannot tolerate enmity between a hero who must be elevated and a god who sits on high, a monster may serve as intermediary. This intermediate position is a natural extension of the monster's essence as a hybrid and "between" being. To the hero, the monster is a villain and a threat. To the high god, the monster is a family member, employee, or pet. The monster, imbued with the high god's authority, represents the high god. By slaying the monster, the hero assumes—is even rewarded with—this authority, without attacking the high god directly. The motif neatly allows an upstart to triumph, and a major deity to remain alive and well. Monsters may be agents of chaos, but as a literary device, the beloved monster stands between the hero and high god to preserve the integrity of the cosmos.

This essay explores the beloved monster motif in ancient Near Eastern texts. An awareness of this phenomenon can help make sense of the otherwise puzzling relationships between hero, master, and monster. Some variations on the motif—when it is employed in stories concerning human beings—highlight the artistry of ancient authors in adapting a literary device for their unique ends. The motif also appears in the Hebrew Bible; recognizing its appearance can shed light on some difficult biblical texts. The beloved monster constitutes yet another element of the Bible's mythological background, and its transformation demonstrates another side effect of biblical monotheism.

Ugarit

The city of Ugarit flourished on the Syrian coast in the 14th and 13th centuries BCE. It produced far fewer texts than the empires of Mesopotamia, but since its discovery in 1928, it has played an important role in ancient Near Eastern, and especially biblical, studies. Ugarit's language and its literary and religious traditions are closely related to those of the Hebrew Bible. It is at Ugarit

that we find monsters which are literally “beloved” of the high god.¹² The clearest expression of the motif involves three deities familiar to readers of the Bible: the storm god/warrior Baal, the creator/patriarch El, and the chaotic sea dragon Yamm.

Baal, El, Yamm

In the Ugaritic religious worldview, El sits at the head of the divine council, presiding with his consort Athirat over the other gods. Below him are the “sons of El,” second tier gods who are nevertheless major deities in the Ugaritic pantheon. The *Baal Cycle* relates, in part, the conflict between two second tier deities: the chaotic sea god Yamm, and the storm god Baal.¹³ In this myth, Yamm, the appointed heir of El, makes plans to destroy Baal. Yamm’s antagonism may resound with readers of the Hebrew Bible, which preserves in poetry the notion that God battled the sea and its monsters to establish order at creation.¹⁴ The *Baal Cycle* is more concerned with kingship than creation; Baal defeats Yamm, and the subsequent construction of his palace and assumption of co-regency with El are the physical and theological center of the Ugaritic myth.¹⁵ It is victory over the sea that effects Baal’s cosmic advancement.

Physiologically, Yamm is a monster. He seems to be anthropomorphic, though he has tails in a mythological-ritual text.¹⁶ In the *Baal Cycle* he is associated with some fearsome monsters, “the twisty serpent / the potentate with seven heads,”¹⁷ and possibly identified with them.¹⁸

12 Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33–35.

13 Lineation follows Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1997). This summarizes the first four tablets; the remaining two concern Baal’s conflict with Mot, the god of death, who kills Baal and is killed, in turn, by Baal’s sister/consort Anat, following which Baal is restored to life and universal, though uneasy, kingship.

14 See Psalm 65:7–8; 74:12–17; 89:9–15; 104:1–9. The notion is demythologized in the Priestly creation story (Gen 1:1–10) and finds a reflex at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds during the exodus (Ex 15:1–10).

15 Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle Volume II: Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3–1.4* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3.

16 *KTU* 1.83. Wayne T. Pitard, “The Binding of Yamm: A New Edition of the Ugaritic Text *KTU* 1.83,” *JNES* 57 (1998): 280, thinks the tails belong to Yamm’s opponent.

17 *KTU* 1.3 III: 41–42. The “twisty serpent” is *ltn*, who appears in the Hebrew Bible as Leviathan; see below.

18 Smith and Pitard *Baal II*, 54. Against Yamm’s identification with these monsters, see Brendon C. Benz, “Yamm

Yamm is a villain, blatantly disrespecting El and demanding that Baal be made his slave.¹⁹ But Yamm is a beloved monster, enjoying a favorable relationship with the high god. In fact, “beloved of El” is one of Yamm’s regular epithets in the *Baal Cycle*.²⁰ El literally favors Yamm over other gods, designating the monster as his heir.²¹ The relationship is construed as familial, with both Yamm and the narrator calling El Yamm’s father.²² Strikingly, El even seems to consent to and recommend Yamm’s attack on Baal, the hero.²³

The conflict between Baal and Yamm is a divine succession story. Baal, representing the kings of Ugarit, must come into his kingdom. But Baal is actually an outsider: he is the biological son of the god Dagan, not El.²⁴ A natural way for an outsider to assume power is through violence, a military coup. Of course the Ugaritic worldview cannot tolerate an attack on the high god by a divine hero. Yamm, the monster, acts as intermediary. Baal can destroy the monster imbued with El’s authority, thereby being rewarded with that authority, without challenging El directly.

It is fascinating that Yamm is so closely associated with the high god. He is El’s “beloved,” his son, and even his co-conspirator against Baal. Moreover, as an embodiment of the chaotic sea, Yamm is ultimately a poor choice for divine king. While Baal’s heroism proves that he deserves kingship, El’s actions may suggest that this high god is not quite fit to rule. In Ugarit, the beloved monster motif highlights an ambivalence, perhaps even an irreverence, toward the gods that is more typical of Ugaritic texts than others from the ancient Near East.²⁵

as “The Personification of Chaos? A Linguistic and Literary Argument for a Case of Mistaken Identity,” in *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel’s Chaokampf Hypothesis*, ed. Joann Scurllock and Richard H. Beal (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 127–45.

19 *KTU* 1.2 I.

20 *md* *’il*; see *KTU* 1.3 III: 38–39; 1.4 II: 34, VI: 12; VII: 3–4.

21 Possibly in *KTU* 1.1 IV: 13–27; see also *KTU* 1.2 III: 6–10, where El commissions the building of a palace for Yamm.

22 *KTU* 1.2 I: 16, 33, 36.

23 *KTU* 1.1 V: 7–28.

24 Smith, *Origins*, 63–64.

25 Another Ugaritic beloved monster text reflecting this attitude is *Aqhat*. Here, the eponymous mortal rejects an

Mesopotamia

The enormous volume of literature and iconography from ancient Mesopotamia provide us with a myriad of monsters. No single word exists in Sumerian or Akkadian to describe such creatures as a class, but texts and images abound with mixed beings, combining the features of various animals, or of animals and humans, in a single entity.²⁶ These may be supernatural, appearing in literature with a textual sign to indicate their divinity. A banner example is Pazuzu, whose claws, wings, and canine face compose such a fearsome image that he appears as the ultimate “demonic” movie monster: the possessive spirit in *The Exorcist*.²⁷ Like modern monsters, those from Mesopotamia are more than physically mixed; they are “between-beings” that threaten the boundary dividing order from chaos.²⁸

The beloved monster motif appears in Mesopotamian myths such as the *Epic of Anzu*, which depicts the divine monster-slayer Ninurta’s fight against the thunderbird Anzu, and the *Enuma Elish*, in which the warrior god Marduk battles Tiamat, primordial mother of monsters.²⁹ As in the *Baal Cycle*, Ninurta and Marduk rescue the cosmos from threatening monsters that nevertheless enjoy some special relationship with a major deity.³⁰ The grateful gods then endow each hero with their own authority and dominion,³¹ advancing the divine upstarts without coming

offer from the goddess Anat, who then has an arguably monstrous ally assassinate Aqhat. Aqhat’s sister, Paghit, learns of this and takes revenge on the assassin, rather than on his divine employer. Whereas the Bull of Heaven episode from the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* condemns Gilgamesh’s pride (see below), *Aqhat* portrays its hero as wise and sensible, effectively highlighting the deceit and caprice of the goddess.

26 For a catalog, see F. A. M. Wiggermann and A. R. Green, “Mischwesen,” *RIA* 8 (1994): 222–64.

27 William Friedkin, dir., *The Exorcist* (USA: Warner Bros., 1973); so also in the original novel, William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (New York: Harper & Row: 1971).

28 See Karen Sonik, “Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Supernatural: A Taxonomy of *Zwischenwesen*.” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 14 (2013): 103–16.

29 For translation and notes of *Anzu* and *Enuma Elish*, see Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia*, 203–27, and 228–77, respectively.

30 Anzu is something of a trusted personal assistant to the chief god, Enlil. Tiamat is less than “beloved” of major deity Ea, but he spares her when dispatching her consort, Apsu, and may rely on her for information regarding the epic’s climactic battle; see Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005), 446.

31 Ninurta receives “Enlil power,” while Marduk is given “fifty names,” including Ea’s.

into conflict. Below, we will look more closely at a variation on the phenomenon, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh, Ishtar, The Bull of Heaven

Fresh off their victory over Humbaba, the mortal heroes of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are faced with another monster: the Bull of Heaven. This creature is sent to kill Gilgamesh at the bidding of a vengeful goddess, Ishtar, after he insults her and spurns her amorous advances. The Bull is a hybrid being, perhaps capable of breathing fire,³² and having wings and a human face in artistic renderings.³³ It dries up rivers and opens fissures, causing hundreds of deaths and enough damage to starve the land for seven years.³⁴ Much to Ishtar's chagrin, Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat the Bull, earning a hero's welcome upon their return to the city.

The Bull of Heaven is a serious threat to humanity, yet it enjoys a favorable relationship with Ishtar: she leads it by a rope,³⁵ and goes so far as to institute mourning over its dismembered corpse.³⁶ In fact, the Bull acts as a substitute for Ishtar in combating Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Ishtar's father, Anu, is hesitant to grant her access to the Bull, thinking that she herself should be the one to confront Gilgamesh.³⁷ Once the heroes dispatch the Bull, Enkidu lobs its severed haunch at Ishtar, wishing he could give her the same treatment.³⁸ The mortals would love a shot at the goddess, but a narrative in which they are successful cannot allow this. And yet they actually may injure her in some way. Gilgamesh announces in a damaged couplet that as a result of his impassioned action, Ishtar "has no one in the street to satisfy her."³⁹ By slaying Ishtar's

32 George, *Gilgamesh*, 475.

33 Tallay Ornan, "Picture and Legend: The Case of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven" [in Hebrew], *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 27 (2003): 18–32.

34 *EG* VI: 113–22, 101–5.

35 *EG* VI: 14–15.

36 *EG* VI: 158–59.

37 *EG* VI: 87–91; this reading is suggested by Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia*, 80.

38 *EG* VI: 154–57.

39 *EG* VI: 176–77. Foster, *Gilgamesh*, 51. Translation based on a reading suggested by Wolfram von Soden

beloved monster, Gilgamesh has advanced at her expense.

Enmity between the hero and a major deity seems strange in light of other Mesopotamian myths. Indeed, here we have a pointed transformation of the beloved monster motif. In other texts, the heroes Ninurta and Marduk ostensibly fight to restore cosmic order. They are given universal dominion by gods as a reward. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, on the other hand, fight monsters to make a name for themselves.⁴⁰ When Gilgamesh meets new characters, he presents killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven as his finest achievements.⁴¹ Instead of rewarding the heroes, the gods decide that Enkidu must die for his part in slaying their beloved monsters.⁴² Enkidu's death sends Gilgamesh first into the depths of despair and then on a doomed quest for immortality. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a whole speaks strongly against an excess of human pride.⁴³ As a literary device, the beloved monster helps communicate this theme. Readers familiar with the motif might expect the monsters to serve as Gilgamesh's avenue for cosmic advancement. Instead, they highlight his ambition and impropriety. Gilgamesh's heroism does not rescue and oblige the gods, as does Ninurta's or Marduk's, but insults and angers them. The gods respond by reminding him of his place as a mortal, rather than elevating him as a divine

“Beiträge zum Verständnis des babylonischen Gilgamesh-Epos” *ZA* 53: 227, *mu-tib l[ib-bi] ul i-šu*. Cf. Simo Parpola, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* (SAACT I), 93: *mu-tib ŠÀ-[bi] ul i-šu*. Contra George, *Gilgamesh*, 630–31, 844: *mu-tap-p[i-l]a ul i-šu*, “he has none that defames him.”

40 This is the explicit purpose of marching against Huwawa in the Old Babylonian epic (OB *EG* III: 148–60). Gilgamesh and Enkidu arguably do save the world from the Bull of Heaven, but they only engage it after Enkidu falls into a chasm it creates (*EG* VI: 123–27).

41 *EG* X: 32–33 (to Siduri), 129–30 (to Urshanabi), 229–30 (to Utnapishtim).

42 This reason for Enkidu's death is given in the Hittite version; see George, *Gilgamesh*, 478.

43 This is the interpretation of Thorkild Jacobsen, who sees the refutation of pride made in humanistic, not religious, terms; see Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 193–215, and 225.

Alternatively, Tzvi Abusch proposes that the focus of the Standard Babylonian *Epic* is not Gilgamesh's humanity, but his divinity. Abusch sees the seemingly incongruous twelfth tablet, in which Gilgamesh becomes divine ruler of the Underworld, as a necessary resolution of the tension created by Gilgamesh's “two-thirds divine” nature. Gilgamesh avoids this fate when he rejects Ishtar's marriage proposal, but accepts it when his quest for immortality as a human finally proves fruitless. See Abusch, “Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of ‘The Gilgamesh Epic’, Tablet 6, Lines 1–79,” *HR* 26 (1986): 143–87; and Abusch, “The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay,” *JAOS* 121 (2001): 614–22. In this reading, the hero does advance cosmically, being rewarded with dominion and divinity for his victory over Humbaba (but not over the Bull of Heaven).

ruler. In other myths, the beloved monster facilitates cosmic change by allowing an upstart god to advance. The beloved monsters in *Gilgamesh* preserve the cosmic order by keeping humanity in check.

The Hebrew Bible

Although the biblical authors have eschewed most of the straightforwardly mythic tendencies of their ancient Near Eastern relatives and neighbors, the Hebrew Bible is not without its monsters. One immediately thinks of Daniel's visionary beasts, or of the awesome sea serpent Leviathan. But these are not the Bible's only uncanny creatures. Other divine beings—angels—are guilty of category violation.⁴⁴ Ezekiel's heavenly creatures, for instance, have four wings; calves' hooves; human hands; the faces of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle; and they shine like bronze.⁴⁵ Biblical monotheism largely reduces these divine beings to nameless servants of YHWH, unable to represent chaos or threaten divine order: angels are not strictly monsters. In some cases, however, they play a role analogous to the beloved monsters of Ugarit and Mesopotamia. Distorted by monotheism, the beloved monster motif is part of the Hebrew Bible's mythological background, standing behind several texts concerning angels and, especially, Leviathan.

Jacob, God, The "Angel"

Genesis 32:23–33 is the only narrative instance of the beloved monster in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁶ The text reports that Jacob wrestles all night with someone who appears to be a man. The opponent cannot win, so he injures Jacob, who will not let him go before being blessed. The

44 Ryan Stephen Higgins, "Of Gods and Monsters: Supernatural Beings in the Uncanny Valley," in *Not in the Spaces We Know: An Exploration of Science Fiction and the Bible*, ed. Frauke Uhlenbruch (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2017), 93–106.

45 Ezek 1:5–11.

46 This brief discussion relies heavily on Stephen A. Geller, *Sacred Enigmas* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9–29.

opponent gives Jacob the name “Israel,” explaining “you have striven with *elohim* and with humans, and have prevailed.”⁴⁷ After the opponent leaves, Jacob names the place Peniel, claiming to have survived a face to face encounter with “*elohim*.”

One of the many ambiguities in this story is the identity of Jacob’s opponent. The narrator at first calls him a man, but by the end Jacob is sure he has seen a divine being.⁴⁸ The opponent’s renaming Jacob, refusing to give his own name, and haste to flee at dawn suggest a supernatural figure. Indeed, Jacob’s new name makes little sense if his opponent is a human, and victory over a mere mortal is not impressive enough to warrant his new identity. The terms that describe this figure, “*elohim*” and the “*el*” of Peniel, are standard biblical names for God. But it would surely be blasphemous for Jacob to defeat God. One interpretive solution parallels the beloved monster motif. Jacob’s opponent is an angel—a supernatural intermediary who allows Jacob’s victory to be both impressive and religiously permissible. This already appears in Hosea’s representation of the tradition: “He strove with an angel and prevailed” (Hos 12:5a). One rabbinic interpretation further posits that this angel’s name is “Israel”; vanquishing him, Jacob earns this name for himself.⁴⁹ The name “Israel” can further be construed as “God rules/is supreme,” and Stephen Geller writes, “the name implies that Jacob won this supremacy, linked to that of God’s, by a kind of theomachy: he was raised to semi-divinity by defeating a being representing some stage, or aspect of divinity.”⁵⁰ Unable to fight God, Jacob advances cosmically by fighting God’s hybrid

47 Gen 32:29.

48 *kī-rā’itī ’ēlōhīm*; Gen 32:31.

49 “[The angel] named him Israel, like his own name, since he himself was named Israel” (Pirque Rabbi Eliezer 37:4).

50 Geller, *Sacred Enigmas*, 22. Other rabbinic interpretations suggest Jacob’s semi-divine status. A midrash brought by Rashi on Gen 33:20 says that Jacob does not call the altar “El Elohe Israel,” but that God calls Jacob “El” (see b. Megillah 18a). Similarly, in Genesis Rabbah 98:3 it is claimed that “Israel, your father, is an *el*,” who creates and divides worlds as does God. Midrash Tanhuma (Buber) Toledot 11 takes Jer 10:16 (“Not like these is the Portion of Jacob / For it is He who formed all things”) to mean that Jacob played an active role in creation. This notion appears in some strands of Jewish mysticism; see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1–62. My thanks to Robert A. Harris for bringing these midrashim to my attention.

representative, an angel. The ambiguities remain, but the beloved monster motif provides an instructive parallel for this text.

YHWH, El, The Sons of Elyon

A direct, though distant, parallel to the beloved monster motif may be found in Psalm 82. The initial line reads: “Elohim takes a stand in the council of El, among the *elohim* he judges.” The first “*elohim*” is the singular God of Israel, YHWH;⁵¹ the second refers to other gods, members of the divine council who remain nameless.⁵² God rebukes these divine beings for their failure to uphold justice, and ultimately condemns them to death for it: “I had thought you were gods / sons of Elyon, all of you // But surely, like men you will die / like any prince you will fall //”⁵³ The psalm ends with an exhortation directed at YHWH: “Arise, God! Judge the earth / For you are the one who inherits all nations!”⁵⁴

Of particular interest is the identity of El in Ps 82:1 and of Elyon in v 6. As a common noun meaning “god,” “*el*” frequently refers to YHWH in the Bible, and is a component of many of YHWH’s appellatives: El Elyon (Gen 14:22), El Roi (Gen 16:13), El Bethel (Gen 35:7), etc. It may be that the “council of El” in Ps 82:1 is in fact the council of YHWH. The name Elyon, “most high,” also clearly intends YHWH in other biblical passages.⁵⁵ In this interpretation,

51 Although Psalm 82 does not contain the name “YHWH,” it belongs to what many scholars have designated the “Elohistic Psalter,” a collection of psalms (Pss 42–83) that have replaced the tetragrammaton, YHWH, with the name “Elohim.”

52 The Hebrew Bible freely admits to the existence of “*elohim*” and “*elim*,” that is, gods, besides YHWH. This is not really a problem for biblical monotheism, which seems more concerned with the quality of divinity than with the quantity of divine beings. See Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 145–48, for a clear and concise definition of biblical monotheism.

53 Ps 82:6–7. None of the speech in this psalm is attributed to particular characters; it is possible that these lines belong to the psalmist, who now realizes that gods besides YHWH are ineffectual or non-existent. Against this, see Matitiah Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” *HUCA* 40 (1969): 129.

54 Ps 82:8.

55 It occurs in “El Elyon” (Gen 14:18, 19, 20, 22; Ps 78:35); “Elohim Elyon” (Ps 57:3; 78:56); “YHWH Elyon” (Ps 7:18; 47:3); in poetic parallelism with “El,” “Elohim,” or “YHWH” (Num 24:16; 2 Sam 22:14 = Ps 18:14; Ps 9:2–3; 21:8; 46:5; 50:14; 73:11; 77:10–11; 78:17–18; 87:5–6; 91:1–2, 9; 107:11); and by itself (Deut 32:8; Isa 14:14; Lam 3:35, 38).

YHWH/Elohim, El, and Elyon are the same God, presiding over the divine council with supreme authority.⁵⁶ Other biblical traditions suggest that God appointed lesser divine beings to govern the world (cf. Deut 4:19–20; 32:8–9;⁵⁷ Mic 4.1–5); this psalm sets a new trajectory, in which YHWH rules the universe alone.⁵⁸ YHWH’s annihilation of the ineffective gods serves as a metaphor for biblical monotheism’s displacement of polytheism.⁵⁹

The interpretation of the psalm changes dramatically if YHWH is not the same god as El and Elyon.⁶⁰ El is known outside the Bible as the chief deity of the Ugaritic pantheon, and Elyon may be one of his epithets.⁶¹ Here Psalm 82 reflects a “(reduced) polytheism” in which YHWH is one of many second tier members in the council of the god El. More myth than metaphor, the psalm now relates YHWH’s ascendance to a position of dominion, following the pattern of other ancient Near Eastern beloved monster texts. The high god has lost his agency, the monsters have lost their names, and the conflict has lost its combat, but the parallels are striking.

In this interpretation, the psalm is an account of divine succession, not unlike the *Baal Cycle*. Here, El is the high god, just as in Ugarit, and YHWH is the hero, analogous to Baal. Between them are the second tier “sons of Elyon,” just as the “sons of El” stand between Baal and El. The psalm’s between-beings play the role of beloved monsters. As minor divinities (i.e. angels), they are mixed beings. That they are villainous threats is clear; they pervert justice to favor evil humans (Ps 82:2), and set the earth tottering in their divine incompetence (v 5). Their responsibility to rule suggests they were appointed by the high god, just as Ugaritic El appoints

56 So, e.g., Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 44–45.

57 In the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Deut 32:8 says that God set the boundaries of the peoples “according the number of gods”; the Masoretic Text reads “number of Israelites.”

58 For Tsevat, “God and the Gods in Assembly,” 134, Psalm 82 “represents a watershed in the history of ideas,” and is a “historiogenic keryx.”

59 Sommer, *Bodies*, 270, describes this reading as one which “depicts not YHWH’s ascent to power but the moment in which the human believer comes to understand YHWH’s universal dominion.”

60 This reading is taken up by Mark Smith; see Smith, *Origins*, 48–49, 143–44, 156–57.

61 Cross, *CMHE*, 50–52.

the monstrous Yamm as his heir. As “sons of Elyon,” that favorable relationship is also familial.

When YHWH condemns these divine beings to death, he plays the role of upstart hero, rescuing the cosmos. Reading in light of the beloved monster motif thus resolves some tension present in the interpretation that conflates the identities of El and Elyon with YHWH. There, YHWH appoints the defective judges, and is therefore ultimately responsible for the world’s injustice. But if YHWH is the hero and not the high god, the blame rests on El. El’s appointment of the divine beings suggests he is unfit to rule, like Ugaritic El in the *Baal Cycle*, and YHWH’s rescue is an act of heroism. In a monotheistic twist of the motif, the high god El has no explicit agency. The biblically permissible angels act as beloved “monsters,” allowing the psalmist to grant YHWH dominion while avoiding any substantial acknowledgment of another major deity, El.

Although the Bible’s monotheistic editors may not have tolerated it, the beloved monster parallels are strengthened if we return some agency to the high god, El. As with Ninurta, Marduk, and Baal, universal dominion is YHWH’s reward for vanquishing the cosmic villains; El is the one to bestow it. We might imagine that the exhortation in Ps 82:8, “Arise, YHWH!⁶² Judge the earth / For you are the one who inherits all nations!” is not spoken by the psalmist, but by El, who like his Ugaritic counterpart grants supreme authority to the victorious hero god. In any case, the psalm clearly breaks from its mythological background when YHWH condemns not just a single monster who stands between the hero and the high god, but the entire assembly of gods. The beloved monster motif complicates the picture of the divine realm, but by Psalm 82’s end, with the minor gods vanquished and El vanished, YHWH reigns alone.

62 Here, for clarity, I have substituted “YHWH” for the Masoretic “elohim,” following the proposal of many scholars that the tetragrammaton originally appeared where “elohim” now does in this group of psalms; see above, n. 51.

God, Leviathan

One of the Hebrew Bible's most famous monsters is the sea serpent Leviathan.⁶³ The fullest biblical description of Leviathan comes in Job 40:25–41:26, where God expounds for Job the nature of the beast:⁶⁴

Who can pry open the doors of his face?
 All around his teeth is terror.
 His back is rows of shields,
 closed with the tightest seal.⁶⁵

His sneezes shoot out light,
 and his eyes are like the eyelids of dawn.
 Firebrands leap from his mouth,
 sparks fly into the air.
 From his nostrils smoke comes out,
 like a boiling vat on brushwood.⁶⁶

His heart is cast hard as stone,
 cast hard as a nether millstone.⁶⁷

Beneath him, jagged shards,
 he draws a harrow over the mud.⁶⁸

He has no match on earth,
 made as he is without fear.⁶⁹

The description combines images of architecture, arms and armor, fire, smoke, and pottery. This is a violation of categories, creating “an impossibly over-determined amalgam of features ... stitched together into one monstrous body.”⁷⁰ Even in less vivid poetry, Leviathan is physically anomalous, associated with sea monsters in Isa 27:1 and Ps 74:13–14. Psalm 74:14 presents an

63 Although only appearing six times in the Bible, Leviathan has enjoyed a very active afterlife, beginning especially with rabbinic literature. See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003), 26–29, and notes; Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 57–70.

64 The translation of the following verses is that of Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. A Translation With Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2010), 173–75.

65 Job 41:6–7.

66 Job 41:10–12.

67 Job 41:16.

68 Job 41:22.

69 Job 41:25.

70 Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 52.

explicitly monstrous image, adding, “It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan.”⁷¹

Being a representative of the chaotic sea, Leviathan is a mortal enemy of YHWH. God battles Leviathan at creation in Psalm 74. Verses 12–15 of this psalm depict God’s martial victory over the primordial waters, driving back the sea and crushing the heads of the sea monsters and of Leviathan. Only then can God establish celestial bodies and seasons, creating order out of chaos (Ps 74:16–17). Placing the first things last, Isaiah 27 envisions a similar battle taking place in the future, when God will slay Leviathan by the sword (Isa 27:1). In these texts, Leviathan is to YHWH as Tiamat is to Marduk and as Yamm is to Baal: a threatening and chaotic force who must be destroyed to establish cosmic order.

But YHWH’s relationship with Leviathan is not entirely antagonistic. While the divine speech in Job is a fearsome list of the monster’s attributes, it also rings of praise. God says of Leviathan, “I cannot keep silent about him, the fact of his incomparable valor.”⁷² God exalts Leviathan as peerless,⁷³ the “king over all who are proud” (Job 41:25–26).⁷⁴ In a series of rhetorical questions, God intimates that he can draw Leviathan out with a fishhook, press down his tongue with a rope, and put a line through his nose (Job 40:25–26). The image here may be of a defeated enemy, but there is no mention of combat. It is reminiscent of Ishtar leading the Bull of Heaven by a leash. God suggests that Leviathan is not his mortal enemy, but his “eternal servant” (Job 40:28). God asks Job, “Could you play with him like a bird? Tie him up for your girls?” (Job 40:29). Not merely opponent or servant, Leviathan is God’s pet.⁷⁵ Elsewhere, this is

71 Leviathan is known already in Ugaritic texts as one of Baal’s opponents (*ltn*); in *KTU* 1.3 III:41–42, he specifically has seven heads.

72 Job 41:4; trans. Ed Greenstein, *Job: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 181. The line is difficult; the Hebrew *ketiv* reads *lō’-’ahārīš baddāyw ūdabar-gābūrōt wāhīn ’erkō*. Other English translations [Job 41:12] present this as praise of Leviathan’s physical form; cf. *KJV*: “I will not conceal his parts, nor his power, nor his comely proportion.”

73 *’ēn-’al-’āpār mošlō*. *NJPS* translates, “There is no one on land who can dominate him.”

74 *NJPS*.

75 Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 17, also reads Leviathan as God’s plaything in Job.

the monster's purpose. Psalm 104 extols God for the majesty of creation; in speaking of the sea, the psalmist says: "There go the ships, and Leviathan whom you formed to play with" (Ps 104:26). The terrifying chaos monster is in fact God's playmate.

There appears to be a contradiction here: in certain texts, God battles and slays Leviathan, while in others, God praises and plays with Leviathan. Rabbinic interpreters, committed to the idea that the Bible contains no contradictions, decided that there must be two Leviathans. God killed one at the beginning of time (Psalm 74), and will kill the other at the end of time (Isaiah 27); in the meantime, God keeps the surviving Leviathan for sport (Psalm 104; Job 40–41).⁷⁶ In fact, playing with Leviathan is the divine exercise regimen, occupying the last three hours of God's daily routine.⁷⁷ Modern scholars, too, find different conceptions of Leviathan in these texts. Leviathan as God's playmate in Psalm 104 is part of a process of demythologizing that reduces the primordial chaos monster of earlier texts to a "harmless player" in the sea,⁷⁸ and "a toy that has always only delighted and never opposed its designer."⁷⁹

The beloved monster motif provides an alternative solution for the Leviathan paradox. In the ancient Near East, the beloved monster stands between a hero and a high god. In biblical monotheism, however, YHWH is both the hero and the high god, and must assume the traditional roles of both. There is no contradiction in Leviathan's nature, nor has he been demythologized. Rather, entirely consonant with the beloved monster motif, YHWH the hero fights Leviathan, while YHWH the high god favors him. The confusion concerning Leviathan is thus the byproduct of an entirely different paradox. Ugaritic Yamm serves as the means by which Baal gains supremacy without challenging El, but biblical traditions cannot give Leviathan the same neat mythological function. For the writers of ancient Near Eastern myth, the beloved monster

76 b. Bava Batra 74b.

77 b. Avodah Zarah 3b.

78 Christoph Uehlinger, "Leviathan," *DDD*: 514.

79 Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 54.

reflects and protects a fragile cosmos; for the readers of the Hebrew Bible, Leviathan is refracted through a multifaceted God.

Postscript: A New World of Gods and Monsters?

Monsters are eternally fearful and fascinating, and have never left the human imagination. They survive the obscurity of ancient myth to appear in modern literature and film, even if the gods do not. We might think that the specific category of beloved monsters, so heavily involved in the lives and destinies of deities, has been lost. The motif is distorted in modernity, but beloved monsters nevertheless endure.

The titular creature from Ridley Scott's *Alien* is one of cinema's most indelible monsters.⁸⁰ Incubated by an unwitting human host, it hatches aboard a freighter in deep space and stalks the crew from the shadows. This "xenomorph" is a nightmarish hybrid being, designed by surrealist H. R. Giger as a "biomechanical" mix of human, animal, organic, and inorganic elements. In the film, it cannot be overcome, only survived. There is nothing between the crew and the alien but antipathy; nevertheless, it is a beloved monster. If the film's hero is lone survivor Ripley, and its monster is the alien, then its "high god" is the Company, an unseen entity that employs the ship's crew. Ripley discovers that the Company desires the alien specimen, and first arranged for the crew to encounter it. After it is revealed that science officer Ash is secretly carrying out Company orders, he praises the creature: "[It is a] perfect organism. Its perfection is matched only by its hostility ... I admire its purity. A survivor, unclouded by conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality." The Company favors the xenomorph, just as major deities favor their monsters.

80 Ridley Scott, dir., *Alien* (USA: 20th Century Fox, 1979).

The motif's distortion reflects a different view of the cosmos than that found in many myths. The modern monster is evil, but so is the authority it represents. And while it is unbecoming for a heroic Baal to challenge El, it is impossible for Ripley to fight the Company. Baal gains dominion as victor, while Ripley merely survives. As a literary device, the ancient Near Eastern beloved monster protects the high god from the hero and allows the hero to advance, all while preserving or restoring the cosmos. The modern beloved monster "protects" the hero by coming between her and an evil authority that is too powerful to fight, allowing the hero to maintain her status, and underscoring a cosmic order that disfavors the hero.

In this way, the framework in *Alien* is not dissimilar from ancient Near Eastern myths that involve humans in the beloved monster complex. We have seen how the Bull of Heaven comes between the mortals Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the goddess Ishtar. Though they talk a big game, we can assume that Ishtar would be too powerful for the men to best in combat. She may also be too distant, literally. Recall that Enkidu attempts to throw the Bull's severed haunch at Ishtar;⁸¹ the text does not say that it reached or struck her. The goddess wants revenge for a deeply personal insult; she may not be evil, but in this scene she is a villain. Ultimately, the *Epic* denies its heroes cosmic advancement, but it does this through a condemnation of pride rather than a pessimistic expression of human insignificance, as we find in modern narratives.⁸²

We turn again to Leviathan. Devoid of major deities besides YHWH, it would seem that the Hebrew Bible could not retain a Leviathan tradition that includes hero, master, and monster. But in light of the human element in both modern and ancient monster narratives, there may be just such a tradition in the book of Job. If God's positive relationship with Leviathan is troubling, so also should be God's depiction in Job. The book is the Bible's major work of theodicy, but has

81 *EG* VI: 154–57.

82 Closer to *Alien* in this respect is Ugaritic *Aqhat* (see above, n. 25). The mortal Paghit slays the beloved monster for revenge (rather than glory), which she cannot hope to exact upon her real enemy, the goddess Anat. As in *Alien*, there is no cosmic advancement over against this cruel power, only survival and the status quo.

not universally satisfied readers regarding God's justice. God allows all manner of sufferings to befall Job despite the man's innocence. Job knows he is being treated unfairly,⁸³ indeed, like God's enemy.⁸⁴ But Job also knows that God is too powerful and too distant to face.⁸⁵ This relationship casts Job as hero against a villainous high god. Between the hero Job and the high god YHWH comes Leviathan, not in combat, but as rhetoric. God's descriptive praise of Leviathan reminds Job that Job cannot hope to fight the monster. For Job, there is no avenue for cosmic advancement in monster-slaying.⁸⁶ Rather, Leviathan's appearance impresses upon Job his own cosmic insignificance; in response to the overwhelming divine speech, he repents in dust and ashes (Job 42:2). As in other transformations of the motif, the hero in Job cannot hope to take on an antagonistic authority, but survives its representative monster and retires in peace.⁸⁷

Job is given a glimpse into the world of gods and monsters, where YHWH should lay waste to Leviathan but instead wields him. What are we to make of this revelation? Is YHWH the monster slayer, who brings order from chaos in the creation and defense of the cosmos? Or is YHWH the monster's master, who gives it too long a leash and must bear the responsibility? In the Bible, ultimately, YHWH is both. The God who loves Leviathan is one of contradictions, beyond both reproach and understanding, who both allows and eliminates evil. Leviathan complicates the biblical depiction of the divine and exposes God as a victim of monotheism. In light of the beloved monsters, YHWH too is a mixed being, an amalgam of hero and high god.

83 "For he crushes me for a hair; He wounds me for no cause" (Job 9:17; *NJPS*).

84 "Why do you hide your face, and treat me like an enemy?" (Job 13:24; *NJPS*).

85 "Indeed I know that it is so: Man cannot win a suit against God. If he insisted on a trial with Him, He would not answer one charge in a thousand" (Job 9:2-3).

86 Interestingly, Alter's preferred translation of Job 41:4, "I would not keep silent concerning him, about his heroic acts and surpassing grace," takes a hypothetical monster-slayer as a referent. In this case, the hero would advance cosmically, being rewarded with God's praise, but God insists no such hero exists. This interpretation thus also locates the entire beloved monster complex in Job. See Alter, *The Wisdom Books*, 172.

87 The book's prose ending restores Job beyond the status quo of his original prosperity (Job 42:7-17), but an increase in wealth seems a lame reward for all he has suffered, and can hardly be called a cosmic advancement.