

Here be dragons: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6;
John 13:31-35

by [J. Nelson Kraybill](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

Medieval mapmakers, with their limited knowledge of distant lands and uncharted seas, sometimes depicted dragons on the far edges of their maps. *Hic sunt dracones* ("Here be dragons!"), they warned. One map from 1430 has this text written above a ferocious creature: "Here also are huge men having horns four feet long, and there are serpents also of such magnitude that they can eat an ox whole."

Dragons do not appear on our modern maps. But bodies on the rail lines of Madrid and the streets of Fallujah leave no doubt that Something Ferocious stalks the edges of our political and religious maps. Nationalism, tribalism, empire and religion mutate in draconian forms, and we sometimes fail to recognize the beastly genes in our own DNA.

People in biblical times feared chaos as much as we do, and some developed monster cosmologies to reinforce the idea that brute force can produce order. The Babylonians, for example, said creation happened when Marduk murdered his tyrannical dragon-mom Tiamat by splitting her skull with a club and fashioning the cosmos from her corpse. The Bible itself includes monster theology. The psalmist writes, "Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail . . ."

In this beautiful hymn, sea monsters lead a parade of chaos agents that have been subdued to glorify God—deeps, fire, hail, frost and storm. Steeped in imagery common to the ancient New East, the people of Israel would have called the monsters Leviathan or Rahab. In Hebrew understanding, these mythical serpents represented a universe unrestrained and unredeemed by God's loving intervention. The same species resurface in Revelation as the dragon and the seven-headed beast.

Modern dismissal of mythical monsters only makes their power more dangerous. Not long after the September 11 attacks, I got a letter from an old friend. In college, we had been committed to peacemaking, but now, after relatives of people in his

congregation died on a plane brought down by terrorists, he said:

As a Christian, there is no room in my religion for making war to gain vengeance. Making war to prevent the further senseless slaughter of my countrymen is perfectly justified, however. . . . I have an obligation to defend myself, my family and my neighbors. By choosing to massively attack innocent people, the perpetrators of these acts have lost any right to have their point of view considered by civilized people. Whatever happens to them now is their just due.

Reading that letter still chills me. Beyond the rage I see the profile of the chaos monster. My friend is making a bargain with the creature: let me use you, briefly, in hopes that I can stop others from enlisting your services. Leviathan co-opts a disciple of Jesus into the merciless cycle of violence that kills battalions of soldiers in countless countries and leaves bodies hanging on a bridge in Iraq.

What would the apostle Peter say to us as growing tensions separate Christian from Muslim or Israeli from Palestinian? Perhaps Peter would tell the story of how a beastie-filled vision inspired him to share the gospel with an enemy soldier named Cornelius—a Roman centurion who held the same rank as the man who supervised the crucifixion of Jesus.

Acts 11 is about the gospel crossing boundaries as daunting as any we have in our world today. Of course, Cornelius was not trying to kill Peter. But Peter later died at the hands of Roman executioners. The early church not only preserved the account of Peter evangelizing a Roman centurion, but also told of how Peter convinced skeptical church leaders that it was God's design for him to embrace the enemy. Acts features this story as a reconciliation between circumcised and uncircumcised. But in the first century, tension between Jew and gentile could lead to a blood feud.

Christians have options other than further violence when the chaos monster stirs enmity between peoples. In 1999 my colleague Ted Koontz joined other Christians on a trip to Iraq to examine the effects of U.S. sanctions. Koontz later reported that they shared communion with an Orthodox Christian congregation that had "roots deep in antiquity" and even used the same Aramaic words that Jesus may have used at the Last Supper.

Iraqi believers warmly welcomed their foreign guests. “Only days before, an American bomber had destroyed most of a block in the city,” Koontz says. “Our countries were enemies, yet we found ourselves embracing as brothers and sisters.”

At a time when bombers darkened the skies and devastated the earth below, my colleague experienced “a new heaven and a new earth.” In that brief, holy space, God made a home among mortals. At least within that humble group of Americans and Iraqis, death was no more. The old way of revenge and hatred dissolved, and God made all things new.

On the night before his violent death, Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Could the disciples have known on Thursday night of Passover week that on another day, “one another” would include followers of Jesus in every nation on earth? Could they have imagined that, in the death and resurrection of the one they called Lord, God would defeat Leviathan?