

Reflections

reading notes

JANUARY 2004—*On Monsters*

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote two now famous essays. One is titled “On Fairy Stories” and the other by the title, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” In the latter of these two essays he defends *Beowulf’s* author for the inclusion of monsters in his story.

Verlyn Flieger, a professor of English at the University of Maryland has written a great deal on the works of Tolkien. In her book, *Splintered Image*, she makes this observation on Tolkien’s opinion of *Beowulf*. “Heroism in the face of inevitable defeat is the theme of the poem...” (p. 17). And,

It is not just the fact of death *qua* death that, according to Tolkien, gives *Beowulf* its power and its theme, but death by the forces of darkness embodied in the monsters. ‘It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant,’ he declares (MC 33). The quality of the doomed battle, and its special glory, resides as much in the nature of the opponent as in the fatality of the outcome. No mere struggle against another man would carry this weight of meaning. *Beowulf* the man must fight monsters—things frighteningly larger and other than himself—for his defeat to be so overwhelming, his death so grand that by means of these the reader can glimpse the shoreless sea. It surely is no accident that Tolkien’s own fiction engages its heroes in battles with monsters, battles in which the outside is ambiguous. Seldom is victory outright, and often when it is, it is followed by death (as in the case of Theoden) or suffused with irony (as in the case of Frodo).

Tolkien’s thinking on *Beowulf* compels me to wonder if some application is to be found to the apocalyptic images of Scripture. For example, in *Revelation*, God’s people are confronted with beasts of land and sea (Rev 13); beasts with seven heads and ten horns, ominous and frightening to behold—so frightening that the people are moved to ask, “Who is able to make war with the beast?” And there is a dragon with power to spare, for it is the dragon that gives the two beasts their power.

Why did God portray the foes of the early church as monsters? Could it be that, “No mere struggle against another man would carry this weight of meaning”?

Paul affirms that our struggles are not against flesh and blood but against the devil, “against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:11, 12).

