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The Monstrosity of God Made Flesh

Karl Barth on God as Leviathan

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Abstract

Three times over the course of thirty-eight years, Karl Barth images God as the monster Leviathan (once each in the Epistle to the Romans, Church Dogmatics II.1 and& IV.3.1). Barth's imagination for God in monstrous form emerges from his interpretation of Romans 11:35, in which the apostle Paul quotes a line from Job 41:11, a poem about Leviathan, to describe the greatness of God. Using monster theory and a close reading of Barth, this article will discuss how God as Leviathan answers one of Barth's primary questions—namely, how it is that Jesus saves human beings from their headlong rush into the abyss. Moving from Barth's exegetical insights, through Barth's soteriology, the article ends with the ethics of a God made monstrous flesh—an ethics that Barth explicitly links to the status of prisoners and all those depicted as monstrous and cast into the abyss.

Keywords

Barth – monster theory – Leviathan – Christology – incarceration – Job 41 – Romans 11 – flesh

1 Introduction

This essay is based on a noticing: namely, that on three separate occasions across the span of his theological career, Karl Barth used the Leviathan as a metaphor for God. Such a monstrous metaphor would beckon exploration even if it ruptured the predictable plodding of dogma only once.[1] The fact that over a

1 I wish to express my gratitude to the enthusiastic teaching of Eugene F. Rogers. While

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span of thirty-eight years Barth thrice returned to this wild and weird depiction summons the reader like a siren's song:

> exchange your wafer for hardtack,
> His flesh for a fish,
> and jump "with him in the stream
> that hurries downwards to the abyss."[2]

Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the heart of Barth's theology, in both its orthodoxies and its innovations. The reader assumes that "flesh" means human flesh; Barth says as much.[3] And yet, hidden in the fleshy heart of Barth's theology, lies the suggestion that God has also taken on monstrous form. Barth's imagination of God in monstrous form emerges from his interpretation of Romans 11:35, in which the apostle Paul quotes a line from Job 41:11, a poem about Leviathan, to describe the greatness of God. When Barth comments on this verse in his second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, he highlights the way in which Paul is using a poem about Leviathan to name characteristics of God.[4] This article will show how Barth amplifies Paul's oblique references, reclaims additional Leviathan language from Job 41, and unabashedly uses that monstrous language to describe God.

When Barth describes God as a Leviathan again twenty years later in Volume II/1 of *Church Dogmatics*, he makes clear that his claim is more than metaphor.[5] In doing so, Barth begins to unpack how God is Leviathan similar to the way in which Jesus takes on flesh.

The Leviathan is not simply a metaphor for God because its strength, mystery, and unbindable freedom *mirror* the strength, mystery, and freedom of God. The Leviathan is able to reveal knowledge of God because God is the *content* of its mystery in the same way that God makes "his works" the content

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teaching me Barth when I was still a girl, he modeled for me that the best theology proceeds by coloring both inside and outside the lines of tradition, always all at once. I thank him for teaching me again, some twenty years later, how doing theology for beauty's sake can bring joy to a life too marked by prisons.

2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 215.

3 Barth writes, "'Flesh' is the concrete form of human nature and the being of man in his world under the sign of the fall of Adam—the being of man as corrupted and therefore destroyed, as unreconciled with God and therefore lost" (*Church Dogmatics* IV/1:165).

4 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 423.

5 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.

of "His Word."[6] In other words, God inhabits Leviathan as Barth understands Christ to inhabit flesh.

Using insights into monster theory from Jeffrey Cohen and Aleks Plukowski, I will show how Barth's imagination of God as a monster falls within a longer Christian tradition of turning to the hybrid, liminal, shape-shifting bodies of monsters to describe the hybridity of Jesus as God in human flesh—specifically, a monster called a hellmouth, the monster at the gates of hell into whose jaws the abyss is rushing. In his final commentary on Job 41, Barth makes the radical suggestion that Jesus, Elected and Electing, Judged and Judge, is revealed to be both abyss-bound and abyss, hell-bound alongside humanity and a Leviathan, the hellmouth itself.[7] God arrests humanity's course into the abyss by becoming the mouth of the abyss into which humans rush.

Moving from Barth's exegetical insights, through Barth's soteriology, the article ends with the ethics of a God made monstrous flesh—an ethics that Barth explicitly links to the status of prisoners and all those who are depicted as monstrous and cast into society's abyss-equivalents. I will show how Barth suggests that in God as Leviathan, one gains the explicit inclusion into the body of God and life of the church those bodies, groups, and spaces that have been labeled monstrous in an attempt to exclude them from the various human projects of church and state, salvation and political life.

2 Job 41 in Romans 11: Barth's Biblical Case for God as Leviathan

God's first appearance in fishy flesh occurs in the second edition of Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*, published in 1922.[8] In Romans 11:35, the apostle Paul uses a quote from Job 41:11 to describe the elusive, incomprehensible sovereignty of God. The Job quote in Romans 11:35 is the basis for Barth's Leviathan-God metaphor. Barth treats Romans 11:34–35 in one paragraph, and his citation of Romans with its attendant commentary is worth reproducing in its entirety. First, Barth quotes Romans 11:35, adding in the Old Testament verse references. Then Barth expounds upon the verse by drawing additional language from Job 41. The passage reads:

> **"Who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counselor** (Isa. xl. 13)**? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be rec-**

6 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.

7 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:423–423.

8 Barth, *Romans*, xi.

> **ompensed unto him again** (Job xli. 11)?"—This is presumably an echo of the description of Leviathan-Crocodile in Job xli.—There is no direct knowledge of God. He decides without the assistance of counsellors. It is impossible to lay hold of Him. Men cannot bind Him, or put Him under obligation, or enter into some reciprocal relationship with Him. There can be no 'Federal Theology.' He is God, and God only. This is the affirmation of the Epistle to the Romans.[9]

Given the muddled layers of citation now at work (I am citing Barth, who comments on Paul, who quotes Job), let us briefly look back to the original poem in Job 41. Job 41:1–34 is a poem about the wonder and horror of the Leviathan. The poem is placed in the mouth of the Lord (Job 40:6) as God's own speech to Job about the surpassing greatness of God's creation. This particular poem about the Leviathan is the final poem in what are often termed the "whirlwind speeches" of Job 38–41. God's wild words about Leviathan serve as something of a grand finale, a capstone, in God's response to Job. Job has asked that God give an account of God's "indictment against him" (Job 31:35), and God's response is a poem about a sea monster.

Most of Job 41 is presented as God describing the Leviathan in a series of third-person queries: *Can you pull in the Leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?*, etc.[10] But Barth notices that in Job 41:11, in the very verse that Paul quotes, the language switches from third-person to first-person description—God slips from describing Leviathan to describing God's own self! Job 41:10–13 reads:

> No one is fierce enough to rouse **him** [Leviathan]. Who then is able to stand against **me**?
> Who has claim against **me** that **I** must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to **me**.
> I will not fail to speak of **his** limbs, **his** strength and **his** graceful form.
> Who can strip off **his** outer coat? Who would approach **him** with a bridle?
>
> NIV, bold mine[11]

9 Barth, *Romans*, 423.

10 Job 41:1–2, NIV.

11 While not the standard scholarly choice, I use the New International Version in this article because it follows the Masoretic Text on the grammatical point in question while using the same verse numbering as Barth uses when referencing Job 41. Rendering my own transla-

The first-person slippage is brief; in the thirty-four verses of the poem, the first-person language suggesting God's self-description happens only in verses 10b and 11. What is the reader to do with this pronominal inconsistency?

In Romans 11:35, Paul glosses over the slippage, turning the first-person language back into the third-person language. God's first-person self-description is lifted from its context as a sort of stand-alone descriptive statement about the divine, and Paul renders the "I" of Job's poem into the third-person "God." In doing so, Paul stymies what might seem to be an invitation to read the wider poem as God's own self-description. Paul is happy to use Job 41:10b–11 as a statement about God's sovereignty, but Paul rhetorically masks for his Roman readers the way in which this divine description is enmeshed in a description of a mythical water monster.

But what Paul masks, Barth amplifies. As Barth moves into his brief commentary on Romans 11:34–35, Barth *reclaims* language from the rest of Job 41, language that explicitly describes the Leviathan, and Barth unabashedly uses that monstrous language to describe God. On the surface, when Barth writes, "There is no direct knowledge of God. He decides without the assistance of counsellors. It is impossible to lay hold of Him. Men cannot bind Him, or put Him under obligation, or enter into some reciprocal relationship with Him,"[12] he seems to be using quite common and characteristic divine descriptors. But in Job 41, these phrases do not describe God—they describe Leviathan! The Leviathan is the one who cannot be bound (Job 41:1–2). The Leviathan is under no obligation (Job 41:4). The Leviathan will not speak to men or be in any relationship with them (Job 41:3). Yet, in Barth's conjuring of Job's description, the Leviathan becomes capital "Him." The divine pronoun 'Him' comes to inhabit the grammatical location of God's wild and mysterious monster Leviathan. In

tion of the MT would add to the confusion in that the Hebrew verse numbering differs here from both Barth and the standard English translations. In the MT, the poem in question is Job 40:25–41:5 with the primary verse in question (41:11) being numbered 41:3. While the New Revised Standard Version uses the same verse numbering as Barth does, the NRSV follows the LXX on v. 41:11 to read, "Who can confront it and be safe?—under the whole heaven, who?" While there is an argument to be made for following the LXX here, it is what neither Barth nor Paul does. The NIV provides a translation that is close to the MT, reflects the grammatical shift from third person to first person in 41:11 with which Barth is concerned, and keeps the verse numbering that Barth uses. For those readers interested in the differences between the MT and LXX in v. 41:11 (41:3), I recommend Marvin H. Pope, *Job: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, Doubleday: 1965), 335–338.

12 Barth, *Romans*, 423.

Barth's reading of Job, when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind (Job 40:6) with a long description of the Leviathan's unbindable power and majesty (Job 41:34), God is really speaking about God's self.

3 Beyond Metaphor: God Is in Leviathan as the Word Is in the World

The second use of the metaphor emerges in Volume II/1 of *Church Dogmatics*, a volume entitled *The Doctrine of God* in a section entitled "The Knowability of God." Barth published Volume II of *Dogmatics* in 1942,[13] roughly twenty years after God surfaced as Leviathan in 1921. In this section Barth is concerned with the human ability to know something about God. Specifically, Barth is concerned with the human ability to know God *through creation and through human nature*. Barth does think there is a certain way in which humans can know something of God through human nature and through God's other creatures.[14] But Barth is at pains to make the distinction that this knowledge comes not through human nature itself, but through human nature as it has been created in and transformed by Christ, human nature as it points beyond itself to the possibilities made flesh in Jesus.[15]

What strikes me is the language that Barth uses to describe a "wrong" and "right" understanding of the relationship between the cosmos, human nature, Jesus, and knowledge of God in this volume. Barth describes the "wrong" idea

13 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2:x.

14 The reader might note that there are phrases throughout this section that, if lifted out of context, read as if Barth's work might permit more room for "natural theology" than he is classically understood to have permitted. While I am in no way arguing for natural theology in Barth in this article, I have found that Barth's writing on God's self-revelation in Leviathan presses against the inclination in Barthian studies to stress divine revelation in a way that risks debilitating human knowing when addressing Barth's epistemology. For an example of a Barthian epistemology that stresses divine agency in human knowing, see Trevor Hart's "Revelation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37–56. This article makes the modest suggestion that Barth's engagement with the Leviathan may, at the least, push the reader toward a more dialectical understanding of epistemology in Barth's thought, something like Bruce McCormack's work on "veiling and unveiling" in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 269–273. But for those readers who wonder with Paul Dafydd Jones, "Ought the enclosure of each human 'in Christ' to allow, in some way, the question of 'natural theology' to be reopened?" I commend the Leviathan passages referenced here as a fruitful and intriguing starting point (*The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* [New York: T&T Clark, 2008], 252).

15 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:112–114.

that humans can know God through human nature as such as a "monstrous misunderstanding."[16] The phrase 'monstrous misunderstanding' is a translation of *ungeheuren Selbstmißverständnis*.[17] While in its adjectival form *ungeheuren* could be rendered "gigantic" or "huge," *Ungeheuer* is a basic German word for "monster." Humans can only know God through their nature because Christ has taken on that nature, rendering it a site of divine revelation; to think otherwise is a monstrous misunderstanding.

But ironically, the "right" way in which humans can know God through their nature, that is, through Christ's having taken it on, is also described in monstrous terms. Barth describes the epistemological implications of the Christ event as a "revelation of God" that "has already broken in upon him and mastered him as his original and future truth, alien, transcendent, and irresistible."[18] To believe that we can know God through our human nature is "monstrous," but Christ's inhabitation of our nature that makes possible human knowledge of God is *fremd*,[19] or "alien, foreign or strange." In volume 2 of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth's human knower is depicted as stuck between a theological "rock and a hard place" that is coming to sound more and more like Scylla and Charybdis.

Barth moves on in this passage to explore the ways in which humans know the Word through the cosmos by commenting on Psalm 8, Psalm 104, and Job 38–41. I will limit my comments here to Barth's treatment of the Job material. Barth begins his exegesis of the whirlwind speeches by noting that something within them brings Job to his knees in confession of the greatness of God.[20] The whirlwind speeches, with their enigmatic litany of questions, effect a conversion in Job. Barth does not rest with this basic insight; he presses in by asking, "*But how* is Job brought to this point?"[21] What is it about a series of questions on the monstrous variety of God's creatures that brings Job into a confessional stance before God?

Barth first answers his own question in the negative. In commenting on the poems about "Behemoth and Leviathan, summoned by God Himself as His monstrous witnesses,"[22] Barth writes,

16 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:112.
17 Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1 (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1942), 124.
18 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:112.
19 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1:124.
20 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.
21 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.
22 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.

> How far can all this lead Job to the knowledge that God is He who is right? It is obviously not a direct understanding of God's works; for this text (Job 40–41) most emphatically stresses that the works of God are not understandable to man but incomprehensible, indeed dark and strange, in their being and nature … it is not the being and nature of these works of creation that instructs and converts him. The fact that the world is large and strange is not the new thing that brings him to repentance.[23]

Leviathan does not reveal God through its own being and nature, strange as it is. Instead, Job is able to learn something about the identity of God through Leviathan *because the Lord of the Leviathan is also* "the truth of the mystery of Leviathan."[24] Just as human nature can reveal Christ because Christ inhabited it, the Leviathan can reveal God because God is the truth at the heart of its mystery. Barth's claim is so extraordinary that it is worth quoting him again at length:

> God Himself makes His works the content of His own Word to [Job]. God Himself, by whose Word these works of His have come into being! Therefore, obviously not a God who will be the content of what man himself can, in an emergency, say about a kind of world-mystery in face of Behemoth and Leviathan, but the God who just in His Word is the Lord over all, and as such the Lord also of Behemoth and Leviathan, and as such also the truth of the mystery of Behemoth and Leviathan.[25]

At this point, Barth presses his claims about the synergy between God and Leviathan beyond the boundaries of metaphor. The Leviathan is not simply a metaphor for God because its strength, mystery, and unbindable freedom *mirror* the strength, mystery, and freedom of God. The Leviathan is able to reveal knowledge of God because God is the *content/Inhalt* of its mystery in the same way that God makes "his works" the content of "His Word." *In other words, God inhabits Leviathan as Christ inhabits flesh*. The fundamental transgression

23 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.

24 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115.

25 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:115. The German reads, "Gott selbst seine Werke zum Inhalt seines eigenen Wortes an ihn macht. Gott selbst, durch dessen Wort diese seine Werke ja *geworden* sind! Also offenbar nicht ein Gott, der der Inbegriff dessen wäre, was der Mensch sich angesichts von Behemoth und Leviathan über irgend ein Weltgeheimnis zur Not auch selber sagen kann, sondern der Gott, der gerade in seinem Wort der Herr ist über Alles und als solcher der Herr auch des Behemoth und Leviathan und als solcher nun auch die Wahrheit des *Geheimnisses* von Behemoth und Leviathan" (KD II/1:127).

between Christ and creature, Word and world, is the same dynamic by which God is knowable in the monstrosities of the sea (or knowable in anything else for that matter).

In Barth's final sentences of this excursus, he makes explicit that his Christology and soteriology are at stake in his reading of the Leviathan. Barth writes, "It is not too much to say that the mystery of chapters 38 f. which leads Job to repentance is in fact identical with the mystery of the revelation, i.e. with the mystery of the election and leading of Israel, of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ."[26] The mystery of God in Leviathan *is identical with* the mystery of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The German reads, "ist *sachlich* identisch mit," which adds even more emphasis to the way in which God in Leviathan is "really, practically, or factually" identical to the mystery of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[27] One finds at the end of this excursus that Barth's earlier language of monstrous knowing actually foreshadows his primary claim made explicit here: the Word of God taking on human form is indeed "alien."[28] For Barth, the incarnation reeks of the monstrous bodies visible just off salted docks. And yet … the Word flaked in flesh,[29] flayed, and set back to sea, while alien, is simultaneously "irresistible."[30]

3.1 *Monster Theory Note 1: Jesus and Monsters Both Have Hybrid Flesh*

It is worth pausing here, before we move to the final sighting of God in fishy flesh, to hear a small word from monster theory on the boundary-crossing nature of monstrous bodies. In his opening essay to the volume *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen offers seven 'theses' about the nature of monsters that have been widely accepted and have come to guide monster theory more broadly.[31] His first claim is that "the monster's body is a cultural body."[32] Whether the moment calls forth giants, vampires, zombies, or cyborgs, a monster always represents the fears, desires, values, and fantasies of its culture. Monstrous bodies, maybe more so than other bodies, are written and can be read as bodies that point to the meaning-making work of any given cultural moment.

Specifically, monsters seem to be summoned at moments when meaning must be made of differences, boundaries, and the hybridity that arises when

26 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:116.
27 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1:128, italics mine.
28 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:112.
29 Leviathan is described as having "flakes of flesh" in Job 41:23.
30 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:112.
31 Jeffrey Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25.
32 Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 4.

boundaries are crossed.[33] Monsters are often depicted in hybrid bodies made of different animal and human parts. Sometimes monsters can change form from mammal to reptilian to human to things more mythical and ethereal.[34] Monsters can sometimes move from death to life and back again. Outside of their own hybrid form and performance, monsters tend to be *located* at boundaries, borders, and edges. Monsters were depicted in the Middle Ages at the edges of maps, presumably as a warning but perhaps also as a statement of the unknown beyond the known.[35] Monsters dwell in those spaces presumed uninhabitable by humans: the oceanic, the forest depths, heaven, the heights of snow-peaked mountains, hell, and the abyss.

It is precisely the hybridity and liminality of monstrous bodies that gave rise to a set of monstrous depictions of Jesus and the Trinity in the Middle Ages. As artists, cathedral builders, and iconographers attempted to make sense of Jesus's hybrid body (both human and divine) and the hybrid nature of the Trinity (Godhead three in one), they turned to depictions of Jesus as a bird-man and the Trinity as a three-headed being.[36] Jesus, like a shape-shifter, signifies plurality. The body of Christ is excessive, overflowing its boundaries, inviting others into its flesh, lending itself for eating (a common monstrous theme), and so it is no wonder that at the precise moment of contemplating the possibilities of Christ's flesh, Barth is drawn to the monstrous. Barth is in good company here. As Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills have explained, "In the context of medieval Christianity, monstrosity … provided a way of mediating the middle ground between human and divine, once again both stressing and subverting the hierarchical relationship that exists between the two."[37]

4 The Monstrosity of God at the Heart of Barth's Soteriology

Barth's Leviathan-God shows its fleeting form one final time at the tail end of Barth's career, in the last full volume of *Church Dogmatics* entitled *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. God appears in "that alien and hostile form" in Volume IV.3.1, embedded in what is sometimes called Barth's commentary on the Book of Job,

33 Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 6–16.

34 Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 6.

35 Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, "Introduction," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 8–10.

36 Robert Mills, "Jesus as Monster," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 28–54.

37 Bildhauer and Mills, *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, 14.

and what he calls a commentary on "The True Witness."[38] The work is dated to 1959, thirty-eight years after God first appeared in fishy form for Barth and seventeen years after its previous sighting.[39] In such a series, this last surfacing of God as Leviathan elicits the sense that Barth's veritable ocean of theological prose has always had something of its very own Loch Ness … a shadow-meaning or haunted truth that has coiled through Barth's wave-like, dogmatic repetitions. Before turning to the specific passage, a word of framing about Volume IV is in order.

If monsters dwell at the edges of landscapes and the borders of conceptual possibility, then the geographical language of Volume IV sets the stage for the monstrous. Barth is primarily concerned with expounding the reconciling work of God in Christ, but he repeatedly describes the work of Christ in spatial terms. One of Barth's primary ways of naming the incarnation in this volume is to speak of the "way of the Son of God into the far country," which even becomes a section heading in paragraph 59.[40] Ultimately, Barth equates the "far country" with death and Golgotha, calling it "the most dreadful of all foreign spheres."[41] Alongside language of "far country," Barth deploys language of *Absturz* or "abyss" as a geographical descriptor for human sinfulness.[42] The human person, in Volume IV, is repeatedly imaged as rushing headlong into the abyss, with no ability to reverse course.[43] The problem that God faces in human sinfulness is depicted as a spatial one: humans are being swept into an abyss, and Jesus is journeying into the far country to retrieve them from it. Perhaps most miraculous of all, Jesus will return from the far country in a homecoming akin to the prodigal son's.[44] The language Barth deploys suggests that Christ's work will be a boundary-crossing journey into sites that have not been traversed … or at least borderlands from which no one has heretofore returned successfully.

If Barth were a theologian who saw fit to leave Christ's explorations into death at the fuzzy, unpainted edges of the map, his boundary-pressing language might stop with these words suggesting liminal space. But Barth is a thinker prone to ask, "*How*?" And it is precisely because he wants to know the how, the why, the when, and the texture of Jesus's journey into the far country that Barth

38 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:431.
39 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:xiii.
40 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:157.
41 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:175.
42 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1:234–236.
43 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:213.
44 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2:20–24.

must come face to face with the full monstrosity of a God enfleshed. As Barth presses into the heart of Jesus's reconciling work, he asks, "*How* is God for us? … *How* has He arrested and reversed its course into the abyss?"[45] The German reads, "*Wie* ist Gott für uns? … *Wie* ihren Lauf dem Absturz entgegen aufgehalten und umgekehrt?"[46] Barth answers his own question with reference to the monstrous. Barth explains that God arrests the human course into the abyss through nothing short of "giving Himself in the Son to this alien (*fremde*) life."[47] When Barth comes to the task of naming the nature of the incarnation, Barth cannot help but notice that flesh is *fremd*—alien, foreign, and strange—to the body of God. There is something odd, supernatural, not-quite-right about the hybridity of God in skin.

Barth is coming close to saying that the Word made flesh is monstrous, and Barth inches closer to that claim in the pages that follow. He writes that Jesus "did become—and this is the presupposition of all that follows—the brother of man, threatened with man, harassed and assaulted with him, with him in the stream which hurries downwards to the abyss, hastening with him to death, to the cessation of being and nothingness."[48] Barth says that the presupposition behind all of Volume IV is that God has taken on human form, but the specific way in which Barth describes that enfleshment is important. The image Barth offers of Christ's incarnational salvation is that Jesus has jumped like a fish into a stream that hurries toward the oceanic abyss. Jesus, whose work has already been described as alien, strange, and located at the boundaries of the possible, is now starting to look more and more specifically like Leviathan. It is with salvation framed in precisely these oceanic terms that we turn to Barth's final and most lengthy comments on Job 38–41.

For the first time in Barth's work, his comments on God as Leviathan rest within a wider, somewhat comprehensive, fifty-one-page commentary on the Book of Job. Barth offers his commentary on Job within a text about Jesus Christ as the "one true witness," because Barth thinks that Job exemplifies the best of how humans can respond to the revelation of God's identity in the world.[49] But as it turns out, even Job is not wholly successful in his response to God's "sinis-

45 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:214, italics mine.

46 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1:235, italics original.

47 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:214. Barth repeats the term *alien* on p. 215.

48 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:215. The German reads, "Er ist—das ist die Voraussetzung alles Weiteren—des Menschen *Bruder* geworden: mit ihm bedroht und also mit ihm betrübt und angefochten, mit ihm in jenem Strom, der jenem Absturz entgegeneilt, mit ihm dem Tode, der Aufhebung seines Seins, dem Nichts entgegentreibend (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1:236)."

49 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:383–384.

ter, strange, disquieting, and even terrifying" presence as it comes to manifest in Job's life and body.[50]

Barth rehearses the well-known tale of Job's loss of property, children, health, and reputation. And of note, Barth continues to use spatial imagery to describe the horrific depth of Job's loss. Job is "left in a blind alley from which there can be no exit."[51] In language that is now familiar, "Job sees himself struck by all these adversities and swept into the mounting stream of dissolution which relentlessly hurries him towards destruction, death, and the underworld."[52] Rather than distance the reader from Job's suffering with rhetorical flourish, Barth's spatial language for Job's suffering helps locate for the reader a sense of Job's plight in her own body and landscape. The reader can feel with Job through this spatial language that "it is dreadful to be here with only this end in prospect, to be on the way which leads only to this abyss, to this house from which there is no return."[53]

But Barth insists that this dreadful state is not Job's complaint! Job does not complain that he is death-bound. Job does not complain that he is rushing to the abyss. Job does not demand removal from the stream that is a blind alley. Rather, Job's complaint arises out of the deep knowledge that *even as he hurries toward the abyss, he still has to do with God*.[54] Job is the best human witness because he remains faithful to the knowledge, against the seeming facts and against the words of his friends, that his dejection is not a rejection. Despite all appearances, God is still for him. And it is out of this knowledge that God is still with him that the complaint of Job arises: namely, that *God has become unrecognizable*. Barth writes, "God has exercised His freedom toward [Job] by reducing to the cheerless minimum of actual preservation the blessing with which He had hitherto undeservedly blessed him. He has thus encountered him in a form in which He is unrecognizable as his God even though He has not ceased to be this."[55]

The language that Barth uses to describe this offensive unrecognizability of God deploys the grammar of the monstrous more than ever before. God is repeatedly called "alien," "strange," and "enemy."[56] This God is "shocking" and

50 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:431.
51 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:398.
52 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:400.
53 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:400.
54 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:401–404.
55 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:405.
56 The language on these points is relentless. I would direct the reader interested in these adjectives to the entirety of IV/3.1:405–433.

in "terrible form,"[57] and Barth wonders what possible relation a person might have to "the majesty of the terrifying."[58] Job's own words in this context become like "meteors descending from another world."[59] And as Job is faced with this monstrous God, Job "demands as a right that God should put off this alien form and make Himself comprehensible."[60]

If the miracle of the book of Job is that God sees fit to answer, the mystery of the book of Job is that God does so with "two formidable monsters."[61] This story is not one of "flight from the 'strange' to the 'true' God."[62] When confronted with Job's complaint that God is alien, God presents God's self as a full-blown monstrosity. God rhetorically summons the behemoth and Leviathan in one of the longest poems in scripture, and these monsters "speak for Him. God causes them to do so."[63] In a move akin to the move in Volume II (in the second sighting described above), the monsters speak of God *properly*, not through metaphorical similarities. Within the truth of the monsters is a truth concerning God's very self, indeed the very "message of the cosmos" dwells in monstrous flesh.[64] Job could have misunderstood God's own self-presentation as monstrous. Barth explains, "Job might do no more than gape … He might simply close his eyes in disgust."[65] But God gambles on Job when God reveals God's self as Leviathan. God expects Job "to hear and understand and take to heart His Word even in that strange and bizarre form" translated more pointedly, "in the self-declaration of His creature [*seiner Kreatur*]."[66]

And Job is found able. When Job is presented with God in Leviathan, Barth says that it is "immediately and accurately accepted and understood by Job, the Word of God is spoken."[67] Job understands what Barth claims unabashedly: that God's many words about God's monster Leviathan are *the* Word of God. God *is* the strange monster patrolling the abyss. Barth presses the ontological claim to the point that only monstrous hybridity can bear when he writes, "Beyond all the majesty and power which are only lent to creation, but reflected in them,

57 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:426.
58 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:415.
59 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:406.
60 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:406.
61 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:430.
62 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:424.
63 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:430.
64 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:430, 432.
65 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:431.
66 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/3.1:499.
67 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:432.

Yahweh Himself is seen directly in it by Job."[68] *Jahve selber*—Yahweh Himself—is seen *unmittelbar*[69]—directly, immediately—in Leviathan, and in the face of Leviathan, Job falls silent—not out of fear, not even out of awe, but in the deep knowledge that "Yahweh remained unshakably true even in the strange form in which He encountered Job."[70]

4.1 *Monster Theory Note 2: On God as a Hellmouth*

It is worth noting here one more bit of monster lore that may help to elucidate why the appearance of God as Leviathan somehow assured Job that in rushing further and further toward the abyss, Job was actually rushing toward the God he knew. In a delightful article on apocalyptic monsters, Aleks Plukowski explores the iconography of a certain sort of monster known as a "hellmouth."[71] These hellmouths literally represented the jaws or gates of hell into which the abyss is rushing. Hell, in these images, is the body of a monster. One enters hell through the monster's mouth. The two most common hellmouths were wolves, water snakes, or a hybrid of the two. Leviathan, specifically, was understood to be and imaged as a hellmouth.[72]

There is some evidence that Barth knew of this mythic relationship between Leviathan and the gates of hell.[73] As Barth presses his claim about God as Leviathan to its ontological limits, Barth feels the need to name explicitly that God is not just dressing up as Satan. Barth writes that God revealed as Leviathan is not God "in Satanic guise, etc., but God Himself meeting [Job] in darkness, terror, and wrath, that it is at His hands that he suffers, and yet to Him that he appeals, and in Him that He seeks comfort."[74] Barth seems to know that Leviathan will be associated with Satan, perhaps specifically as a hellmouth, and instead of backpedaling from the claim, Barth presses further into it. This is no satanic disguise! God is found precisely in the monstrous jaws of a hellmouth, and in this one finds the answer to Barth's urgent question, "*How* does Jesus arrest our course into the abyss?"

Thus far, Barth has simply said that Jesus arrests humanity's course into the abyss by jumping into the stream with them. But jumping into the stream is

68 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:432.
69 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/3.1:499.
70 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:433.
71 Aleks Plukowski, "Apocalyptic Monsters: Animal Inspirations for the Iconography of Medieval North European Devourers," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 155–176.
72 Plukowski, "Apocalyptic Monsters," 161.
73 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:147–148.
74 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:424.

only the first half of the answer, and Barth's best answers always come in pairs. God becoming Leviathan is the second half of the answer. *How will Jesus arrest humanity's course into the abyss? By becoming the jaws of the chasm into which humans hurry*. In these final pages of Barth's lifework, one hears the haunt of the Holy whispering above the chaos of the deep, "I will become the very mouth of hell toward which you rush. I will become the fish, I will be with you in the stream, but when we get to the abyss, I will become that too." Jesus, Elected and Electing, Judged and Judge, is revealed to be both abyss-bound and abyss, hell-bound with humans and the Leviathan, the hellmouth itself. And in this, one finds that the promise of God as Leviathan is commensurate with the promises at the very heart of Barth's theology. When one finds one's self hurrying toward hell, drowning in a stream beyond one's power, when one finds one's self being pulled over the edge of sanity and one sees the monstrous nature of what lies at the bottom of the drop, the promise of God as Leviathan is that as people are swallowed alive by the very real monsters of this world, they will find themselves swallowed into God.

5 Facing Social Monsters and Abyss Equivalents: Barth's Prison Ethics

Perhaps one might best stop here, having shown how Barth's notion of God as Leviathan explains how Christ has arrested our dissolution into an oceanic abyss. But Barth was never one to stop writing at the end, and I would like to press a bit into the ethics of this theological claim. I want to close by asking the following: What is the ethical significance of insisting that God has taken on monstrous flesh instead of simply human flesh? Or put slightly differently, what is gained in the dialectic of Christ as both hell-bound and hellmouth that isn't already available in Barth's other dialectic descriptions of the work of God in Christ (Judge and Judged, Elected and Electing)? To answer my own question very simply: In God as Leviathan, one gains the explicit inclusion into the body of God and life of the church those bodies, groups, and spaces that have been labeled monstrous.

The language of the monstrous has always been, and still is, used to declare some human beings beyond redemptive reach by declaring them outside the human project. If people can be classified as aliens, they do not deserve the rights of citizens. If black flesh can be imagined as rapacious, excessive, ghettoized, and self-destructive, it can be denied a right to its children. If criminals are monsters, then they can and should be kept in cages, barred from the rest of "us," and even killed when circumstance requires. Monsters, as such, exist beyond the limits of human nature and human social organization and there-

fore beyond the reach of God's salvific work in and for humans. One imagines that the people one is accustomed to classifying as monsters (rapists, foreigners, murderers, child molesters) are not-quite-human beings, and therefore one can imagine that they are not-quite-those for whom God has acted. And once one has made that logical move, the pitchforks of our social sin have carte blanche to round up and string up the monsters in our midst.

Barth is explicit in Volume III/2 that the "abyss" is not just a metaphor. The abyss is a term that describes the very real places of marginality and monstrosity in the world. He writes:

> All this makes the grave, the ocean, the wilderness places of death as present here and now in full actuality for the sick, the outcast, the persecuted, defeated and oppressed, the prisoner in his prison, the wanderer in the wilderness, the storm-tossed sea-farer. For although they are not yet actually dead, they already experience the full reality of death.[75]

The prisoner, for Barth, stands in close "proximity to the abyss" on "the very edge of the abyss" "on a slippery slope"[76] toward inevitable destruction. But the good news for the captive is that God already swims in the abyss *as its native inhabitant*. There is nothing to fear in either being defined as monstrous or in being sentenced to places that have been declared monstrosities. Jesus is present, Barth insists correctly, "before all our locked prison doors."[77] God is the monster at the heart of all abyss-equivalents, doing God's saving and transforming work, even, perhaps especially, there.

God as Leviathan is good news for those declared monsters, but there is also a message for those who are the villagers/citizens in these tales of social categorization. Because if God is Leviathan, then Christians can no longer shoot harpoons into the carceral abyss without risking the death of the One who is Life and Source. Barth himself seems to suggest as much. Barth exhorts his reader "to be ready to be told by Him that we shall not find God where we think we should look for Him, namely, in a supposed height … but among the smitten and abased, among whom we would prefer not to reckon ourselves."[78] It is among the monsters, Barth says, that God has raised a throne. If one wishes to see the throne of a God who is a Leviathan, one has to lay harpoons aside and jump, like Jesus, into the stream that rushes downward toward the abyss.

75 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:592.
76 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:593.
77 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:395.
78 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:416.

Oddly, and without explanation, Barth claims that if we "do not close our eyes" to the painful point at which God reveals God's self as a monster, we will find "the Christmas message in the midst of darkness."[79] If we open our eyes when we are scared, appalled, and disgusted, Barth says that we will see Christmas. For years, I had no idea what this meant. But perhaps the answer is found in Barth's relationship to the prison—and the men confined therein—of Basel, Switzerland. In 1954, Barth began occasional preaching at Basel Prison at the request of Martin Schwartz, the regular chaplain there.[80] In the years while Barth was sorting through the ideas of CD IV/3.1, he was visiting that prison multiple times a year.

In 1958—presumably the year that Barth wove this intriguing web of Jesus, prison, abyss, and Christmas found in CD IV/3.1—he preached the Christmas Communion service at Basel Prison. He called his sermon "He Stands By Us."[81] Barth describes looking out at the incarcerated men gathered for a Christmas Communion, pointing at each one individually, and saying that even when it seems that no one is willing to stand by them, Jesus, "*stands by you—and by you—and by you!*"[82] As he tries to proclaim the truth of Jesus' radical solidarity with these incarcerated men, Barth uses the language of water and drowning with which we are now so familiar. He proclaims, "A drowning man cannot pull himself out of the water by his own hair. Neither can you do it. Someone else must rescue you. This is the good news of Christmas."[83] Barth is coming close to the language that he will also use in CD IV/3.1, and as the sermon reaches its climax, Barth's language becomes even more explicitly the language of the abyss, with the stable at Bethlehem becoming a frightening abyss-equivalent. The sermon concludes:

> The place where the Saviour enters in looks rather like the stable of Bethlehem. It is not beautiful, but quite ugly; not at all cosy, but really frightening; not at all decently human, but right beside the animals. You see, the proud or modest inns, and our behavior as their inhabitants, are but the surface of our lives. Beneath there lurks the depth, even the abyss … down there Jesus Christ sets up quarters. Even better, he has already done

79 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1:417.

80 For a treatment of Barth's interest in and commitment to carceral issues, see Jessica Decou, "The First Community: Barth's American Prison Tours," in *Karl Barth and the Making of Evangelical Theology: A Fifty-Year Perspective*, ed. Clifford B. Anderson and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 67–90.

81 Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1978), 136.

82 Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, 137, italics original.

83 Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, 138.

> so! Yes, praise be to God for this dark place, for this manger, for this stable in our lives … In this dark place he will have Holy Communion with us. This is what we now shall have with him and with one another. Amen.[84]

On Christmas Day in 1958, Barth looked out at a group of incarcerated men. He saw the abyss. He saw clearly that the men before him were drowning. And he also saw that Jesus had chosen to set up a throne there among them. Barth told those men what he saw in them, and then he took into himself the body of Christ behind locked prison doors with them. I suspect this is the call of Barth's Leviathan-God: to keep our eyes open long enough—against fear, against the blinding crash of salt-spattered waves, against an overpowering, abyss-bound undertow—to see a monster where we expect Bethlehem's baby, and a human being where we expect a monster.

84 Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, 142.