

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study Guide on Revelation 12-13—Week 8 (Sunday, Oct. 18)

Background: These two chapters are difficult to understand. It is important not to get bogged down in every historical and political detail that may lie behind these visions. We must let the visions as a whole have their dramatic effect upon us. At the same time, we must be very careful to ground our understanding of these visions in the world in which John lived. Every generation has been tempted to find its own historical period reflected in these chapters, but a valid interpretation must be one that John's readers could have understood.

Chapter 12 begins a new section of Revelation. Even though 11:15-19 appears to have brought John's visions to their logical end, John is not ready to let the curtain fall. Chapters 12-14 offer a closer look at the assault on the people of God by the forces of evil. It is in this section that the reader gets the clearest insight into the political situation faced by John's churches at the end of the first century. However, John knows that the battle is not just between Christians on earth and rulers on earth. It is a cosmic conflict as old as creation itself. Therefore John incorporates and adapts Jewish and pagan myths that had been known for centuries, myths in which a savior figure destroys the chaos monster.

Text: John has Christianized the ancient myth. The pregnant woman appears not to be Mary but rather the true Israel (the 12 stars represent the 12 tribes), the people of God. The dragon (Satan) has seven heads, just as many of the evil monsters did in ancient myths. The horns and crowns are symbols of strength, authority, and dominion. The child is Jesus the Messiah, who is later taken away into heaven (at his ascension after defeating Satan in his death). The casting to earth of the dragon is probably John's way of saying that the death of Jesus defeated Satan (12:11). The war has been won, although battles must still be fought between Satan and Jesus' followers.

When the woman flees to the wilderness (as the Israelites escaped to the wilderness), the earth opens its mouth and swallows the serpent-dragon's river, perhaps reminiscent of the Red Sea becoming dry for the Israelites to pass. Satan's pursuit of the woman's other children refers to the persecution of Christians by the Romans, as chapter 13 will make clear.

In chapter 13 the dragon carries out his work by his two lieutenants, the beasts from the sea and the land. The beast from the sea is very much like the dragon himself, with his heads, horns, and crowns. His looks are also based on the terrifying beasts from Daniel 7, and like the beasts of that passage this beast represents worldly empire as embodied in the Roman emperor. John wants his readers to know that the real power behind the Roman Empire is the devil himself.

The "fatal wound" (13:3) may be the beast's mockery of the slaughtered Lamb (5:6). But it also recalls a common myth from the 1st century that the emperor Nero, who had killed Christians in the 60's (and later killed himself), would come back and reclaim his throne. The emperor at the time John wrote, Domitian, was a lot like Nero: he wanted to be worshipped and called Lord and God. The cities in Asia Minor were filled with emperor worship. In fact, it was virtually impossible to be involved in civic life without being involved in the imperial cult, since festivals, athletic events, processions, and other events were often done in worship of the emperor. Many believe that a failure to worship the emperor at this time would be like failing to repeat the pledge of allegiance today.

The beast from the earth (13:11-18) is also a parody of Christ, since it has horns like a lamb; however, its speech "like a dragon" betrayed its true identity. This beast represents those who encouraged emperor worship: city officials, imperial priests, provincial councils and governors. Its signs by which it deceived the people (13:13-14) were produced by sorcery and trickery, a common practice among ancient religions (see Mark 13:22). The mark of the beast is probably not a literal mark that first-century people received. Rather it is John's way of saying that those who worshipped the emperor had marked themselves, showing where their real loyalties lay.

The beast's number 666 has bedeviled readers for 1900 years. The best guess is that it refers to Nero, since the sum of the values of the letters of his name in Hebrew is 666. Perhaps the point is that the present emperor,

Domitian, is simply another Nero, claiming to be God and persecuting Christians. Whether 666 represents Nero or not, John expected his readers to understand.

Discussion Questions

1. Many today have rejected the idea that there is real evil in the world. What is needed, they say, is education and better understanding of one another. What does Revelation 12-13 say about evil in our world, among people and even among unseen spiritual forces? How does this square with your worldview?
2. These chapters also seem to suggest that the forces of evil can inhabit not only people but also institutions. Do you agree that evil can be found in the very structures of our world, including corporations, governments, other institutions, and even society itself? What are some examples?
3. John teaches that God's war with the forces of evil has been won, even though there are still many battles to be fought. How does this affect our attitudes toward our struggles against evil?
4. Chapter 13 reminds us that God must have our ultimate allegiance, not the government. We might add that this is also true of our jobs, our civic commitments, even our families. How do we know when other commitments have usurped the place of God in our lives?
5. The term devil means slanderer or false accuser, and the name Satan means adversary. How does this relate to the work of the dragon? In what devious ways does he go about his work?
6. Why was the dragon's expulsion from heaven a good news/bad news scenario?
7. Several of the Roman emperors portrayed themselves as the god Apollo. In a myth known to John's readers, the pregnant mother of the god Apollo is pursued by the monster Python, whom Apollo later slays. What do you think John was telling his readers by making the emperor the monster rather than the savior? What might it be like for the early Christians to have to stand against the emperors, who seemingly had brought peace and prosperity to the world?