

Revelation, Session 5

Seven Signs in Heaven: A Woman, A Dragon and Two Beasts

Revelation 12:1-14:20

With seven seals opened and seven trumpets sounded, John launches into another set of seven visions. These are not explicitly numbered as were the previous sequences, but they are all introduced with a reference to the seer's vision. The seven visions of the next section of the text are:

1. 12:1-18: A Woman and a Great Red Dragon, introduced by "A great sign appeared"
2. 13:1-10: A Beast from the Sea, introduced by "And I saw"
3. 13:11-18: A Beast from the Land, introduced by "And I saw"
4. 14:1-5: The Lamb Enthroned, introduced by "And I saw"
5. 14:6-13: Three Angels, introduced by "And I saw"
6. 14:14-20: The Son of Man and his Angels, introduced by "And I saw"
7. 15:1: Another Sign in Heaven, introduced by "And I saw"

The final vision repeats the motif with which the series started, and like the final "seal" at 8:1, it simply begins the next sequence of visions. The first three visions of this sequence are no doubt the most important of the series, containing important data about the situation that Revelation addresses.

The Woman Clothed with the Sun

The Woman and the Great Red Dragon (12:1-18) are images that have universal resonance, with parallels in widespread myths. The basic elements are a pregnant woman

(vv 1-2), threatened by a menacing serpent (vv 3-4), who continues his threats after the woman gives birth (vv 5-6). A hero appears to defeat and cast down the serpent (vv 7-9), leading to a celebratory hymn (vv 10-12). But alas, the serpent is not totally defeated and returns to afflict the woman and her child (vv 13-17). The last episode in the mythic imagery sets up the next two visions, beasts from sea and land, who are somehow tied to the Great Red Dragon.

The image of the “woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet” (12:1) has had a lasting influence on Christian iconography of the Blessed Virgin, both in Europe [The Immaculate Conception by Batolomé Esteban Murillo, 1678, in the Prado Museum, from Wikicommons] and, in North America, in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



[Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City, Mexico; from Wikicommons]



Or on the Golden Dome at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN.



Yet, while the image may make some reference to the actual mother of Jesus, it resonates with other referents. The woman surrounded by heavenly bodies is reminiscent of various mother goddesses of the Mediterranean, including perhaps Artemis (Diana) especially revered at Ephesus, one of the cities addressed in the book. The figure of a divine mother and a child threatened by a serpent has a close parallel in Greek myths told about Diana and her brother Apollo and their mother Leto. That the author might be ironically alluding to such a myth is likely, as part of the Revelation's appropriation of the oppressors' symbols. Roman emperors since Augustus had associated the order and beauty of their imperial rule with Apollo, and John had earlier (9;11) referred to the angel of the abyss as "Apollyon," a pun on the name of Apollo, meaning "the destroyer."

[Woodcut copied from a Greek vase.]



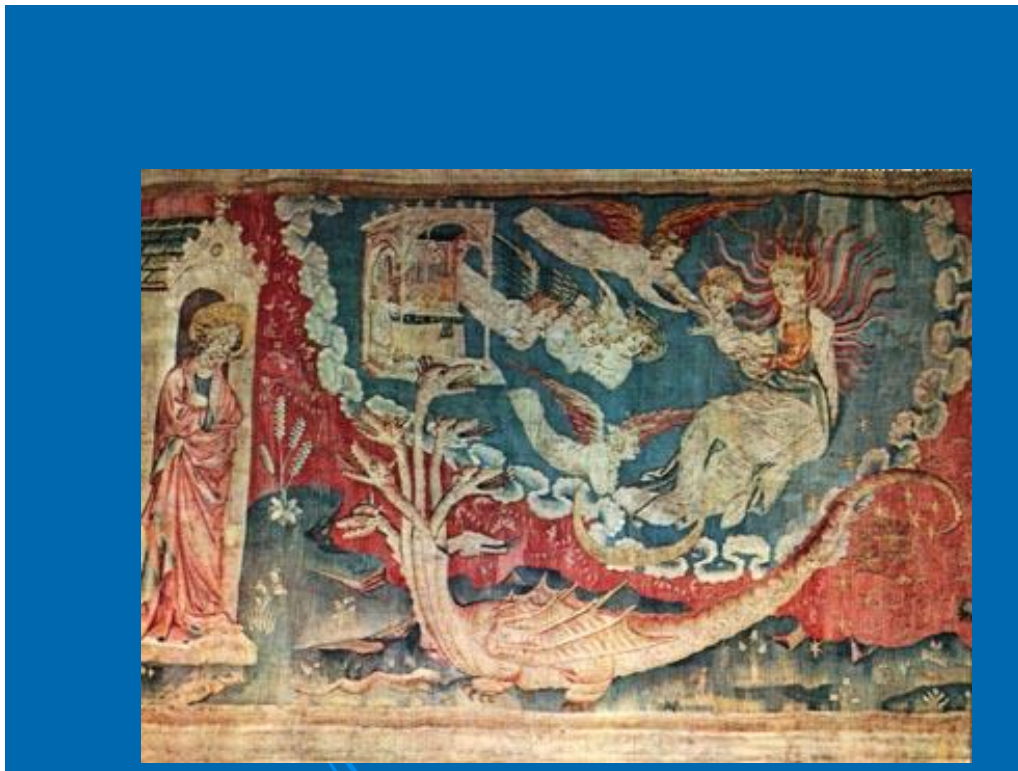
FIG. 26.—Leto, or Latona : with the twins Apollo and Artemis. © www.malcar.com

Once the serpent is cast down from heaven, the woman, now a mother, is given the wings of an eagle (v 14), perhaps evoking the promise of Isaiah 40:31 that those who wait on the Lord will “mount up with wings like eagles.” She flees to the desert along with “the rest of her offspring” (v 17). They are defined as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.” This final set of comments on the woman suggests that she is a symbol of a collective reality. As the mother of the very special child, she is Israel, and as the mother of those who hold the testimony of Jesus, she is the Church. Using feminine imagery for collective realities such as cities was common in the Greco-Roman tradition. Christians made a similar move when they imaged the Church as the “bride” of Christ (Ephesians 5:23), as John will do in his final vision.

The persecution of the woman and her offspring is to last for a limited period. That period is specified twice in this chapter, in v 6 as 1,260 days and again in v 14 as “a time, times and half a time.” Both refer to the same period of time mentioned in 11:3 as forty-two months, and as noted there, the whole notion of such a specifically limited period comes from the book of Daniel (7:25; 9:24-27; 12:7).

The Great Red Dragon

[From the Angiers Apocalypse Tapestry, 1377-1382]



While the image of the Woman has a certain ambiguity that has created many associations in the history of interpretation of the book, the image of the Great Red Dragon has a more definite profile. The curious combination of seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on each head (v 3) gestures toward the fourth beast of Daniel’s “visions by night.” This creature, “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong” with “ten horns,” (Dan 7:7) represented the last of oppressive imperial power. The combination of seven heads and ten horns and crowns will be replicated in the case of the “where the beast from the land shows up” (13:1), the earthly embodiment of the Great Red Dragon. The specific significance of the number seven will finally become apparent at 17:9. It will have nothing to do with the sacred number seven that has structured the sequences of visions. It will rather be the demonic counterpart to the realm of the sacred, the Seven Hills of Rome and seven “kings” or Roman emperors.

But the book has not yet moved to the realm of earthly politics. After threatening the woman and her child, the Dragon battles a heavenly hero, “Michael and his angels” (12:7). As a result of the conflict, the serpent is “cast out” (v 9). That fate connects him with Genesis 3:14-15, and the deceptive serpent of the creation story, whom Yahweh curses and casts down to the dust of the earth. John makes the connection explicit, naming the dragon, “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world,” who was “thrown down to the earth” (v 9).

[Cloisters Apocalypse]



Yet the serpent remains a Dragon, and as such, evokes ancient myths of combat between forces of good and evil. Such myths were known in ancient Mesopotamia, where the divine hero Marduk defeated the sea serpent Tiamat, and in ancient Canaan, where Baal defeated the sea

monster Yam. The myth of heroic combat with a dragon continued to be popular in Western culture and is most familiar to us in the guise of St. George and his battle with a dragon.

[Raffael, St. George and the Dragon]



The Great Red Dragon of Revelation, in any case, is clearly the embodiment of ultimate evil, but the main affirmation that John’s vision makes is that *this power has already been defeated*. The great voice heard in heaven heard in v 10, like the voice of the elder of 7:13, interprets the vision and celebrates victory in poetic form (vv 10-12). This voice echoes some of the exultation of the heavenly acclamations of 11:15-18. It declares that “Now have come” the realities of the Reign of God and the authority of his Messiah (v 10). What the NRSV translates as “our comrades,” more literally “the brethren,” have already “conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (v 11).

Yet though defeated, the Dragon is not yet totally overcome. He still has venom to spill, which he pours forth from his mouth like a torrent (v 16), threatening the woman and her offspring. This notice sets up the next two visions.

The Beast from the Sea

The keys to understanding the Beast from the Sea have already been mentioned in connection with the Great Red Dragon, which this beast replicates. The various beastly characteristics enumerated in v 2 derive from the images of the several successive empires that oppressed Israel symbolized in the vision of Daniel 7:4–6. What is curious about this beast is that he has a head that “seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed” (v 3). If this is a mysterious riddle at this point, its meaning finally becomes clear when the symbolism is explained in 17:9 as “kings” associated with Rome. The “death blow” must refer to a violent death, from which the beast itself, the Roman Empire, recovered. The two candidates for the slain head would be Gaius Caligula and Nero, both of whom died violent deaths in the first century. The visionary will later (13:18) provide a clue that Nero is in view.

The rest of the description of the Beast from the Sea (vv 4-8) perfectly fits Roman imperial rule, which would have come “from the sea” to the shores of Asia Minor. The most striking part of the description is the focus on worshipping this blasphemous beast (v 8), no doubt an allusion to the contemporary cult of the goddess Roma and the divinized emperors in sanctuaries of the major cities of Asia Minor.

The description of the Beast from the Sea concludes with a warning to those under its heel (vv 9-11). The warning, in effect, rejects violent resistance to the beast. If captivity or death comes, it is to be accepted. Endurance and fidelity are what is required of the faithful.

The Beast from the Land

The next beast is a shadow of the two great beasts that have preceded it. It has two horns, like the Lamb, but speaks like the Dragon (v 11). Its major function is to enforce the worship of the Beast from the Sea (vv 12-14). One of the ways it does so is through the use of a talking statue (v 15), a device that is attested for the period in the work of a second-century satirist, Lucian of Samosata, who wrote about a religious charlatan, Alexander of Abonoteichus, the “false prophet,” whose image was a human-headed serpent!

The details of the worship imposed by Beast from the Land is the use of money, coinage that bears the images of Roman imperial rule, without which one cannot buy or sell (v 17). John claims that this coinage functions as a demonic parody of Jewish phylacteries or Tefillin, boxes with verses of scripture tied to head and forearm (cf. Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18). Coins would certainly be found in the hands of any buyer or seller, and would probably be touched to the forehead as a good luck gesture (v 16). In any case, the coins are idolatrous because of what is on them, the “image of the beast” (v 16) and his name and “number” (v 17).

John here plays a symbolic game, known as gematria, based on the fact that in Hebrew and in Greek numbers were represented by letters of the alphabet, not by separate numerical symbols, as in Rome. Therefore, any name has a numerical value, the sum of the numerical value of its letters. One can play a guessing game, as John does here. He tells his readers that he has a name in mind the value of which is 666 and asks them to guess the name. The problem of course is that while a name will have one numerical value (depending on how one spells it), a number could refer to many names. Readers of Revelation, who think the book refers primarily to events

of the reader’s own time, usually find no difficulty in identifying a name that will add up to the requisite 666. The most likely solution to the riddle, however, is that the number refers to the name of Nero Caesar, spelled in Hebrew. This would fit the references to the “head that was slain” (vv 3, 12). The gematria works as follows:

Caesar	Nero
ק ס ר	נ ר ו ן
200+60+100	50+6+200+50 = 666

The Remaining Visions

After the three, largely threatening, visions of chapter 13, the rest of this sequence of unnumbered visions contains relatively familiar items. The first is the vision of the Lamb on Mt. Zion, recalling Rev 5:6, surrounded by 144,000, recalling 7:1-8.

A vision of three angels follows (14:6-13). As in chapter 7, the 144,000, here described as virgins (v 4) are part of a larger entity, those to whom the first angel of the next vision brings the gospel (vv 6-7). A new note is introduced by the proclamation of a second angel that “Babylon has fallen” (v 8), anticipating the description of the destruction of Babylon in chapters 18 and 19. A third angel recalls the imagery of chapter 13 and issues a warning not to worship the Beast (from the Sea no doubt) or its image or the coins on which the image is stamped.

The sixth vision returns to center stage the Son of Man, whose appearance to John had inaugurated the book (1:12–20). Here he is accompanied by angels who prepare the “harvest,” particularly of the “grapes of wrath” (vv 18-19), familiar to Americans from the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

The final vision (15:1) simply introduces the next sequence.

Focus Text: Rev 12:1-18

Questions for reflection:

1. How do the images of the Dragon and the Beasts relate to the images of Daniel 7?
2. How do you assess the impact of demonizing political realities?
3. Chapter 12 presents the first major feminine image in Revelation. How do you understand the way in which that image works?

Basic Reading

Gonzalez, *Revelation*, 76-97.

Further Reading

P. J. J. Botha, "God, Emperor, Worship, and Society: Contemporary Experiences and the Book of Revelation," *Neotestamentica* 22 (1988) 87–102.

Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John," Chapter 6 of *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 1998) 198–217.

Steven Friesen, "Myth and Symbolic Resistance in Revelation 13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004) 281–313.

Paul S. Minear, "Far as the Curse is Found: The Point of Rev 12.15-16," *Novum Testamentum* 33 (1991) 71–77.

S. J. Scherer, "Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at the Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev. 13.13-15," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984) 599–610.