

REVELATION

Study 7: The Cosmic Battle

As we mentioned back in our study of the seven oracles to the seven churches in chapters 2-3 of the book, the call for readers and hearers of Revelation to conquer gives us the lens through which we must view and read the rest of the book. All of the visions that are described between the seven oracles to the churches in chapters 2-3 and the final vision of the new creation in chapters 21-22 are meant to help John's readers understand what it actually means to conquer with the Lamb.

Up to this point in our study, we have learned that our role of being faithful witnesses of God and his Messiah is an essential aspect to this idea of conquering and bringing God's kingdom here on earth. However, we have not heard too much about exactly who or what we are up against in this call to conquer. But the message of the scroll revealed in chapter 11 did leave us wondering, "Who or what is this terrible beast that wages war against God's faithful witnesses?"

In this particular study, we will read about John's visions of an evil triumvirate made up of a dragon, the beast of the sea and a beast of the earth. John describes these evil forces as a satanic trinity that wages war against God's people. These visions reveal that these evil forces are the real enemy who must be conquered. In chapters 12-14, John depicts a cosmic battle that is going on behind the scenes of this world; a cosmic battle that all followers of the Lamb are called to participate in.

The Woman and the Dragon

Revelation 12

This first vision that John sees describes a "symbolic nativity scene"¹ where we hear about a woman who is about to give birth to a child and a powerful dragon who is waiting to destroy her child as soon as he is born.² This confrontation between the woman and the dragon reminds readers of the ancient conflict between the woman and the serpent that began back in the garden of Eden.³

¹ N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, 836

² The reader might think about the actions of Herod (a representative of the empire) describes in Matthew 2:16-18.

³ Read Genesis 3.

We are told that the dragon *is* the ancient serpent from the garden, and the original readers would have understood the woman and her child as being symbolic representations of Jesus the Messiah and God's faithful people. This woman is essentially Eve, Mary, Israel and the church all combined into one image.⁴ And the son of the woman is none other than the one who will crush the head of the serpent and who will rule over all the nations as King. The son is exalted to his place on God's throne while the woman flees into the wilderness where she is protected and provided for by God.

After this initial scene, John then goes on to describe a war that takes place in heaven where the dragon – described as the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan and the deceiver of the world – is defeated by the Messiah and is cast down to the earth along with his rebel army of spiritual beings. Those in heaven who had been slain like the Lamb rejoice and celebrate this victory over evil, but John's readers are warned that the dragon is now going to set his sights on abusing God's people here on earth while he still has time.

John is pulling back the curtain of this world and revealing that there is a great cosmic battle that is taking place behind the scenes of the Roman Empire's persecution of the churches. He offers his first-century readers a heavenly perspective on their earthly circumstances and reveals that the real enemy is not actually the Roman Empire (or any human ruler). There are evil spiritual forces at work behind the scenes of life in this world, and they know that their time to stir up trouble is limited.

This symbolic nativity scene and the war that follows also reminds us of what Jesus accomplished through his life, death and resurrection. Many of us tend to only view the cross as something that forgives us of our sin so that we can go to heaven when we die. However, the message emphasized throughout the New Testament and especially here in Revelation 12 is that the cross accomplished God's decisive victory over evil. The apostle Paul tells us that through the cross Jesus disarmed the spiritual forces of evil and triumphed over them.⁵ John tells us here that the cross of Jesus cast the spiritual forces of evil out of heaven forever and down to earth where their time-clock is ticking.⁶

All of this provides a new framework to help the first-century Christians better understand why they are suffering and why they must patiently endure it. And it also sheds new light on what it means for all followers of Jesus to pray that God's kingdom would come here on earth as it is in heaven.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 127-128

⁵ Read Colossians 1.

⁶ Jesus uses similar terminology in his own teaching in Luke 10:18 and John 12:31-32.

The Two Beasts

Revelation 13

This next vision that John sees describes two beasts – one from the sea and one from the earth. John sees this beast rising out of the sea, and he describes this super-beast with features that are directly taken from the Book of Daniel. As David deSilva describes it:

“John takes the four beasts of Daniel 7, representing in sequence the kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Alexander’s successors, and combines them into a single, unholy hybrid to represent Roman rule and Rome’s heads of state.”⁷

This beast of the sea represents the imperial power of Rome, and it is the beast that was previously described in chapter 11 who makes war on God’s faithful witnesses and conquers them (kills them).

The second beast that John sees rises out of the earth, and it is also referred to later as the false prophet.⁸ This beast of the earth represents the propaganda machine of the Roman Empire that exalts the economic and military power of the empire and that promotes wholehearted allegiance to the way of the empire.⁹ This is symbolized by the infamous mark of the beast that is required on the forehead or hand of all those who want to enjoy the economic benefits of life in the empire.

Now, although modern readers tend to debate and speculate about this mark of the beast, the original readers of Revelation would have understood this mark in relation to the Jewish prayer known as the Shema. The Shema was an ancient Jewish pledge of allegiance that was to be written down and placed on your forehead and hands as a symbol of your total devotion to Yahweh as the one true God. This prayer and practice is described in Deuteronomy 6:4-8 where we read this:

“Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.”

⁷ David deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances*, 43

⁸ See Revelation 16:13, 19:20 and 20:10.

⁹ More specifically it probably represents the priests of the imperial cult and the local authorities who enforce Roman allegiance.

And so, the mark of the beast symbolizes the empire's idolatrous demand of total allegiance. John is warning his readers to not be deceived by these evil spiritual forces that are operating behind the scenes of the empire. Christians must resist the empire's propaganda and deception that calls for total allegiance and endure whatever their allegiance to God and his Messiah may cost them.

It's important for us as later readers of the book of Revelation to see how these images represent realities that actually transcend the first-century and the Roman Empire itself. The beast of the earth can be understood as any and every form of propaganda that leads people to idolize a man-made nation or empire. And the beast of the sea can be understood as any and every dominate empire or nation throughout human history that ends up exalting its own economic and military power as something that is worthy of (and therefore demands) people's total allegiance.

If the first-century churches clearly saw the Roman Empire as the incarnation of these beasts, then it would be wise to ask ourselves where we can see these beasts incarnating themselves today?

Through these visions and descriptions of the dragon and the two beasts, John is revealing that there are evil spiritual forces at work behind the human rulers and dominate empires that oppose God and his people. However, like the Lamb, Christians are called to conquer these evil forces by actively resisting their influence and being God's faithful witnesses who obey his commandments and love their enemies to the point of death if that's what it costs them. This cosmic conflict and the call for Christians to resist the empire and to follow the Lamb is highlighted in what John sees next.

The Choice

Revelation 14

After describing these visions of the dragon and the two beasts that wage war against God and his people, John now sees the Lamb and his army of Christian martyrs standing in opposition to these evil forces. John then sees three angels above the earth who proclaim three messages that warn all the nations and people on earth of the choice that lies before them.

The first angel calls all people on earth to repent and worship God as the one true God who is worthy of their total allegiance. The second angel proclaims that the time has come for oppressive empires to experience the consequences of their idolatry and injustices. And the third angel warns the people on earth that assimilating to the way of the empire will lead them to face the judgement of God – they will have to share in the responsibility of all the idolatry and injustices of that empire.

Commenting on these proclamations made by the three angels, Richard Bauckham writes:

“The conflict between the beast and the Christian martyrs confronts the nations with the choice: heed the witness of the martyrs and repent of idolatry (14:7) or face the judgment of God on all who worship the beast (14:9-11).”¹⁰

This choice and the end results associated with it are highlighted by John’s next vision of the two harvests. The first is portrayed as a good grain harvest that symbolizes the Messiah’s gathering of his faithful people into his kingdom. The other is portrayed as a harvest of grapes that symbolizes God’s final judgement against those who drank the wine of the empire and chose not to repent.

In these three chapters (12-14), John depicts the ongoing tribulation and cosmic conflict between the coming kingdom of God and the empires and rulers of this world. A conflict that began at the resurrection of Jesus (12:5) and that continues until the day of his return (14:14-20). These visions have created a cosmic battle scene with the dragon and two beasts on one side and the slain Lamb and his army of martyrs on the other. These two contrasting images along with the final vision of the two harvests highlight the two pivotal choices that are presented by the three angels (14:6-11).

Repent and give your total allegiance to the one true God or face the coming judgement of God.

Are you being deceived by the power and influence of the beast? Or are you faithfully keeping the commandments of God and patiently enduring whatever your allegiance to God may cost you?

These visions have offered John’s readers a new perspective on why they are being persecuted, and what it means to conquer with the Lamb. Through Jesus’ faithful witness to the point of death, the serpent and his rebel army of spiritual beings have been defeated and cast down to the earth. Now, followers of Jesus here on earth, must conquer these same spiritual forces through their own active resistance and faithful witness to the point of death if that’s what it requires (12:11).

John has made it clear to the first-century churches that there is no middle ground or third option. They must not compromise with the way of the empire. Christians today must not compromise with the dominate world-system operating behind their own society and culture. Instead, all followers of Jesus must “come out” of the idolatrous system and conquer the evil triumvirate of the dragon and the two beasts through their unwavering loyalty and commitment to following the way of the Lamb.

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 94