

Revelation Bible Study #32

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 12:13-13:4

12:13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. **14** But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. **15** The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. **16** But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. **17** Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. **2** And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. **3** One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. **4** And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

Introduction

Much ink is spilled in preterist and historicist commentaries attempting to identify the beast which rises from the sea. Claims are made that it represents the Roman empire, that it represents a certain political power, or that it has connections to the Nero Redivivus myth. Certain heretics also have a penchant for claiming the Church (beginning with whichever doctrine they don't like) is this beast or the woman that rides the beast, and on and on it goes. As we exegete this text, we shall be paying *greater* attention to the preceding context which places significance on the beast from the sea in the first place. If one does *not*, then the identification of the beast makes little sense – or even worse, little significance.

St. John promises that whoever reads Revelation, hears it, and keeps what is written in it is blessed.¹ One must ask the question, in what sense is someone blessed if these realities, circumstances, and persons portrayed in the thirteenth chapter are mere historic accidents? If the beast from the sea is Rome, what good does this book do the believer today? Perhaps a preterist or historicist could claim that identification of the beast contextualizes history, but such a notion makes the book of Revelation bless us in the same way a history textbook does – in other words, it *demotes* the prophetic word to that of secular historiography. We shall do no such thing.

Vs.13-14

12:13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. **14** But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a

¹ Revelation 1:3

time.

These two verses are a recapitulation of the first six verses. For 1260 days (that is, three and a half years or “a time, times and half a time”) the woman – the Church – is to be in the wilderness, being nourished until such time as she is delivered from all who pursue her. This is to say that the New Covenant era, spanning from Christ's Ascension to His Second Advent, has this dynamic present with it continuously. During this time, it is not as though she is *entirely* safe, as the next verses will demonstrate, but she is there primarily for her protection. However, the wilderness is not merely a place of *safety*; since the Church is the true Israel,² then she too must go through the same preparatory process of the desert wanderings *ancient* Israel underwent.

The wings bestowed on the woman gives this passage a unique connection with the book of Zechariah,³ which features a woman being taken into the wilderness by means of flight. But in contrast, the woman from Zechariah's vision is not the Church residing in the wilderness, but a personification of wickedness which is brought to Shinar. The woman that is the Church is given *wings*, showing freedom and mobility; the woman called wickedness is shoved into a basket with a leaden lid. Zechariah wrote his vision as a means of helping the children of Judah who had come out of the Babylonian Exile to see that their former wickedness was to stay *over there*: it no longer belongs to them. By contrast, St. John sees a vision whereby the Church is placed under the discipline of the wilderness, not as an exilic punishment but as a means of keeping her pure and undefiled for our Lord. It is as though the Church is being told “You are not being punished by the wilderness as the Israelites were in Numbers. Nor are you being placed here as an exile like the children of Judah. This is a place of safety for your sanctification.”

Vs.15-17

15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. **16** But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. **17** Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

The devil pours water out in an attempt to drown the woman *by flood*. Though this is most likely symbolic language describing the torrent of persecution launched at Christians, that the devil is behind it demonstrates his penchant for playing God. Yet again, he is shown appropriating to himself actions and decorum which belong to God alone. In Genesis, God flooded the entire World in order to extinguish wickedness from the earth; here the devil produces a flood in an attempt to extinguish righteousness from the earth. Satan's murderous campaign is thwarted by the wilderness opening its “mouth” and swallowing the waters. This is an indication that the wilderness is not a place of *testing* for the Church, but a place of *perfecting*. The last time the earth opened its “mouth” and swallowed something was when the sons of Korah were killed in that very fashion;⁴ here, the earth does this as a means of protecting the Church. In other words, the Church is not being *punished* as the wilderness dynamic persists, but is rather being shielded.

The devil stands on the sea shore, so as to call something forward. He attempted to kill the woman clothed in the sun, that is the Church; he attempted to kill the Christ; he *further* attempted to destroy the woman; all of these efforts came and went to no avail. The beast which rises from the sea is then best understood as a pre-existent figure which the devil calls up and changes to *assist* in his efforts to extinguish the Body of Christ. It can be no other than the World, that second enemy of the Church,

² Romans 9:6, 1 Peter 2:9

³ Zechariah 5:5-11

⁴ Numbers 16

first established by the rebellion of Nimrod in Genesis 11, but now under the control of the devil.

Ch.13, Vs.1-2

13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. **2** And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.

The preceding verse make it clear that the devil cannot destroy the Church directly. He failed to stop Christ's Birth and failed to stop the Church from being placed in the wilderness for protection and sanctification. So, standing at the "sea" in St. John's vision, he apparently calls forth a creature which *bears resemblance to himself*. The devil is described as a dragon with seven heads and ten horns; so too does the beast. The devil has diadems which he wears, so too does the beast. Thus this beast's emergence is an appropriation of the creation of animals which were drawn from the waters and the creation of mankind, which was originally made in God's image.⁵ Christ promises to give new names to believers and for them to have His Name on them;⁶ for the members of the beast, blasphemous names are written on its heads. The authority promised to the saints is unjustly appropriated to the beast by the devil. Thus the devil mocks and appropriates things which God has done in the beginning (creating the animals and man), and that which God promises to do in the end (blessing believers).

It is true that the beast has some similarities with the beasts shown in Daniel 7, and many a commentor believes that this means the beast is the Roman Empire – Daniel's fourth beast. But in that chapter, the lion and bear and jaguar and monster are presented as four kingdoms, with the final one being the worst of them;⁷ in contrast, the beast which rises from the sea has traits of *all four* of Daniel's kingdom beasts. The implication is that it represents *all kingdoms*, or a Worldwide span of its power. It is not a single empire, but the World, which St. John has highlighted from the words of Christ Himself that it hates the Church.⁸

The World, or collective humanity seeking to appropriate divinity, began in earnest at Babel, during which construction mankind was united in a singular attempt at becoming independent from our Lord. God scattered the nations by confusing their languages, leading to the tower never being built. But as Christ warns in John 15, the inevitable hatred against Him and the Church comes from the world in a seemingly newly united front. At some point, satan took such control over it that he was able to provide nonbelieving humanity with that singular purpose – albeit not independence from God as Nimrod and others initially desired, but rather a hatred for and persecution of Christianity. When Christians were put to death by Romans, it was the World's doing, and unbeknownst to the World it was done on behalf of the devil. Yet this same thing is shown when the Japanese shogunate killed missionaries, when hindu extremists slaughtered believers, and when the ISIS terrorist group slit Coptic Christian's throats; they are all doing this in service to the devil through their being part of the World.

Ch.13, Vs.3-4

3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. **4** And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

There was a belief that the wounded head of the beast represents Nero, due to the "Nero Redivivus" urban legend that was going on around the same time that St. John wrote Revelation. If this were the interpretation, then the beast arising from the sea would be a Roman empire captured by a

⁵ Genesis 1:27

⁶ Revelation 2:17, 3:12

⁷ Daniel 7:23-27

⁸ John 15:18-27

resurrected emperor Nero, which would take over even more of the known world (including Persia) and thus begin to persecute believers. To which point we remind the reader why we denied this position in the second lesson in the study series:

Another problem is that the Nero Redivivus legend was popular enough to produce imposters, Nero lookalikes who attempted to capitalize on the phenomenon and raise up rebellions to take over Rome. One of them, Terentius Maximus, operated in Asia Minor, to which the book of Revelation was first distributed! Making matters worse, this occurred during the reign of Titus (79-81 A.D.).⁹ So if St. John was referring to Nero Redivivus, then two horrible consequences are to be found:

-An early date to Revelation's writing (ca.60's A.D.) would find the churches in Asia Minor afflicted with something of a false prophecy. The text says that the wounded head would cause people to marvel and follow the beast; he would be firmly entrenched in the political system represented by the figure. But the Nero imposters who rose up were all either killed or exiled after going public, with no one worshiping them. The seven churches receiving this book would necessarily see at least Terentius' execution and breathe a collective sigh as they made St. John out to be a false prophet.

-A late date to Revelation's composition (ca.96 A.D.) would make St. John look insane, if indeed he was writing about Nero Redivivus. He would be citing an urban legend that had fizzled out already after a number of failures. It would be a sign that the Apostle was getting his "inspiration" listening to various pagans talk about the rumor, then catastrophizing it into "Nero as Beast," and turned Nero into a wicked parody of Jesus. To interpret the passage as being about Nero, and then to assign a late date to the composition, is to make St. John out to be a fool, even to those seven churches that first received the book.

A *better* understanding of the wounded head is to recall Christ's prophecy in Matthew 24:23-24. "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." Christ's head was wounded when a crown of thorns was placed thereupon during His Passion; *false* christs, whether men pretending to be the Messiah or men constructing false christs out of their heresies, would necessarily share this characteristic. Here, St. John informs us that the fake Jesus figures arising from false teachers come from the very same source as those who are killing Christians: the World persecuting Christians in service to the devil.

9 Cassius Dio, Roman History, Epitome of Book LXVI.
https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/66*.html