Interpreting Revelation 12 and 13

What I want to do in the last session is look at another New Testament text as an example of how to utilize and interpret using different methods that we’ve talked about in this course. Once again I won’t necessarily explicitly refer to the method and say, “now I’m doing this” but hopefully you will be able to identify what method is used and how I utilize it as I work through a text. The text I want to focus on is Revelation chapter 12 and 13 and I want to begin by reading just chapter 12. A text like Revelation is very important to read and it begins by issuing a blessing to those who read and hear. So Revelation was first meant to be heard, so there is something about listening to the drama that goes on. I will only read chapter 12 and then just summarize chapter 13. So Revelation chapter 12:

“A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven
say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus."

And so then there is verse 1: “And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.” And then what happens in chapter 13 is you find what Satan finds on the shore of the sea is that he summons two helpers, which we find in chapter 13 in the form of two other beasts: A beast that comes out of the sea and a beast that comes out of the earth. These two beasts are called upon by Satan to help him in pursuing the woman’s offspring which she bore with them in an attempt to destroy them. Now before we understand this text it’s important for us to place it in its historical context and particularly the historical context of the book of Revelation. Revelation is clearly addressed to seven churches that are located in the ancient area of Asia Minor or modern day Turkey.

All of those churches are ensconced upon the Greco-Roman empire that was under Roman rule. One of the features of the seven cities is that all of them have empirical temples that is they were erected in honor or they had temples that were devoted to pagan gods. It was expected that citizens who found themselves in the confines of the empire
would engage in worship or activities of the god or for the emperor. Rome was viewed in a positive light. Rome was responsible for giving peace to all of those who were in the empire or its borders. Everyone owed the empire because of the peace and prosperity, economically that people enjoyed. All of that was the result of Roman rule and the emperor. We have already seen the patron-client dynamic. The patron-client relationship primarily functioned under the Roman emperor. The emperor was seen as responsible for the well-being of the people, in terms of peace and well-being. Everyone had to express their gratitude. We have also seen that the political and economic life of Rome would have been intertwined with the religious life of Rome. All of these cities would have had temples constructed for the emperor, a sign really of an imperial cult, showing one’s gratitude and allegiance to the emperor but also other Roman gods. In fact, most businesses including whether it was a textile business or commercial, or trade, would have been wrapped up with occasions of worshipping the emperor or pagan gods. So one can begin to see in the face of all these opportunities to participate in pagan worship or of the worship for Christians the questions arises, “to what extent can I participate in the culture of Rome?” which would include participating in its religious practices. To what extent can one do that and still keep their allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ.

Some Christians refused to participate in the life of Rome especially in the imperial cult and opportunities to worship the emperor and other pagan gods and to do that because it excluded Jesus Christ. Therefore they would suffer the consequences, like the loss of job or persecution. One person has already died according to Revelation but it doesn’t appear as if there is an empire-wide or officially sanctioned persecution yet. Most of the persecution that arose and resulted in death would have been at a more local level and more sporadic and it would have been local elites pressuring Christians to conform. After all they don’t want to their city to appear rebellious against Rome because they didn’t participate or show allegiance to the emperor or other pagan gods. So, most of the pressure to conform came at a local level. Most Christians didn’t get a second thought to what they were doing and they were quite willing to participate in the economy and whilst doing so, they had to participate in the worship side. So this is the
situation that John appears to be addressing, the reality of Christians at that time. Most likely, Revelation, amongst many dates given, was probably written towards the end of the first century; the middle of the last decade of the first century, under the emperor named Domitian.

**Genres of Revelation**

The genre of Revelation, unlike John 6, consists of a unique blend of a threefold genre. It belongs to the genre of an apocalypse. That is a type of literature that records the vision of a seer, who sees the heavenly world and of the future and couches that vision in highly symbolic language. The purpose of this is to help the reader see the reality of their situation in a new light. So by writing in the form of an apocalypse, John is trying to get his readers to see their situation in a new light, to get them, especially those who are compromising, to wake up and see what is really at stake, and give them a heavenly or transcendent perspective, that has been revealed to John which he passed on in writing to his churches.

We see that this is also a prophecy in that it is primarily a proclamation, a message that addresses in terms of comfort but also exhortation, in that it warns God’s people. It’s also an epistle in that the author communicates a message that is relevant to his reader and therefore it is something that could have been understood. So when we read Revelation 12 and 13, any interpretation of its images or symbols or the text as a whole, that were not able to be picked up on by the readers and understood, is probably to be rejected.

**Context**

So in light of that background, let’s look at chapters 12 and 13 of Revelation. Revelation 12 and 13 follows a section in chapter 11 that discusses witnesses, which the discussion of the two witnesses portrayed the role of the church in the context of the trumpet players in chapters 8 and 9, modeled after the exodus. After portraying these seven trumpeters, John addresses the question in chapter 11, of what is the role of the church in all of this? And he portrays it in terms of two witnesses that the church is to be a faithful witness even in the face of suffering, in the midst of opposition and suffering.
Interestingly, in chapter 11, John describes a beast that comes out of the abyss and makes war with these two witnesses and actually defeats them. So chapters 12 and 13, I think, go into even more detail than chapter 11, to ask the question, “What is the source, the true source, of the church’s conflict?” It goes into more detail concerning these two witnesses, the church, and the beast. Now we are going to see in chapters 12-13 further more detail between the beast and God’s people, the church.

As we look at chapters 12 and 13 then we also need to ask, “What is the meaning of some of the symbols?” What events might be referred to in chapters 12 and 13? When do they occur? Are they describing things in the first century or events that will happen at the second coming of Christ, at the end of the world? So we’ll need to deal with those questions that I think are unique to Revelation as an apocalypse, and as a prophecy as well. Chapters 12 and 13 need to be treated together because they form a unit; based primarily around these three beasts and also the woman and her offspring. We find three beasts or dragons. We find a dragon playing the central role in chapter 12. But in chapter 13 two other beastly creatures that are described like a dragon. We already see that the dragon ends up standing on the sea shore as if he is looking to summon more help and he does so by calling two beasts that resemble him in chapter 12. So chapters 12 and 13 form a unit and again these three beastly creatures probably form what some have called an unholy trinity, that is in contrast to the rest of the references made in Revelation, such as God the Almighty one, Jesus Christ the lamb, then finally the Spirit, the Holy Spirit is described in several ways, such as “the seven spirits of God.”

Now as a parody of that, we find an unholy trinity of that, that is the dragon; and this beast number one, that is often referred to as the Anti-Christ, that which is anti or contrary to the person of Christ. Then finally, beast number three, which would correspond to the Holy Spirit, perhaps. Whether there is a precise correspondence they might overlap, there does seem to be a parody between the three beastly characters here and the trinity of God, his son Jesus Christ and the Spirit, which is already referred to back in chapter 1.
Analysis

So, we will narrow it down and look at chapters 12 and 13 in more detail. Starting with 12, what we want to do is be alert to the symbols and what they could possibly mean and how they are referred to and also to how their character develops. Again, we said the genre of an apocalypse is a narrative of a visionary experience, an account that has a story and a narrative, and it’s not enough just to isolate the symbols and what they mean but to be alert to the whole text and what it’s doing. So the first interesting symbol we are introduced to in chapter 12 is this woman with twelve stars on her head and much of this comes from the Old Testament. Probably the woman here is symbolic of Old Testament Israel and we’ll see though that in the rest of the chapter this reference to Israel as God’s people will merge into Jesus’s own followers, who are described right at the end of chapter 12. They are described as those who keep the testimony of Jesus which is clearly a reference to his church and Jesus’ followers. So in a sense we’re going to see the one people of God from the perspective of Israel but also the people of God through Jesus Christ that includes Gentiles, as well, his church. Although the author doesn’t clearly indicate, one does merge into the other. He’s mainly interested in portraying the God’s people of Israel and the people of the church, as well.

But we are going to see that chapter 12 seems to follow a story beginning with this woman who probably represents God’s people in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel. This woman is portrayed as about to give birth to a child. Before we look at the identity of that child, the author introduces another figure: this hideous dragon whose function in this text is to pursue the woman because she is pregnant with a child who is identified clearly to point an Old Testament allusion. This child is identified as a male child who rules all the nations with an iron scepter. This is a clear allusion back to Psalm 2:8, an Old Testament Psalm that is often seen as depicting a royal Psalm or a Messianic Psalm that is picked up in the Old Testament in reference to Jesus Christ. So the author, by alluding to the Old Testament makes it clear that this child is none other than Jesus Christ, the Messianic ruler, the Son of David, who will rule all the nations with an iron
scepter, as a fulfillment of Psalm chapter 2.

He pursues the woman in order to devour and destroy this child, but as the text clearly indicates, the child is rescued from the teeth of this dragon and is raised up and sent to heaven, therefore, frustrating the dragon and depriving it of its prey. Now one interesting thing in this story, as told in this text, reflects another common story told in the Greco-Roman world. There a number of Greco-Roman myths that follow a similar story or narrative, which is that a goddess is about to give birth to a son and a dragon who is about to devour the son. Sometimes the woman gives birth to the son but other times the son is taken to an island and grows up and then comes back and slays the dragon that was pursuing the woman in the first place. Usually the son is a god, a Greco-Roman god. But John seems to take that story, not to buy into a common myth, but to follow that the story as historical reality. It’s difficult to read Revelation 12 and not see at least in some form, in a very symbolic form, the birth of Christ. But notice it’s compressed: no sooner is the child born than he is swept off and raised to heaven. So in this, in compressed form, we see reference to birth, resurrection and ascension of Christ to heaven, thus irritating the dragon and we see the dragon’s attempt to destroy and kill the son.

Old Testament in the New Testament

It is very interesting that the dragon later on is identified by linking the dragon to an Old Testament reference. He says, “the dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil that leads the whole world astray.” That reference to the ancient serpent clearly identifies the dragon of Revelation 12 with the serpent that deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and identifies him as the devil or Satan, using terms we find elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to this primary antagonist of God and his purposes. We’ll return to that in just a moment, that reference to Genesis.

There are a couple of other important references. Notice that this woman flees to the desert. Again we shouldn’t ask questions about where this geographically takes place or what is going on. The desert is simply symbolic of preservation at this point. So by having this woman flee to the desert, the idea of this is now that God protects his people. Though the dragon pursues her, God keeps and protects her and cares for her. So the
woman is not referring to an actual literal woman but is symbolic. We sometimes reflect on the Old Testament referring to God’s people as a woman, a wife, as the bride of Yahweh or something like that. So even in the Old Testament you often find a woman symbolizing the people of God, Israel. So by having this woman flee into the desert, I think, is a clear indicator of her preservation and safety, and God keeping her and caring for her even with the wrath of this dragon figure who is identified as Satan.

But a further reference is, following that you have this interesting story in verses 7-9 of Satan warring with angels and being defeated and cast out of heaven. The question is when does this take place? Where in the text does this take place? Most likely this is not chronologically happening after 1-6, saying that the dragon did this and then following that something else happened in history. Verses 7-12 are going back and explaining in more detail what happens in verses 1-6. And so you have this battle between Michael and his angels. Remember apocalyptic literature deals with transcendent and heavenly reality as a reflection of what is happening on earth. So now, in true apocalyptic fashion, John sees this vision of this war in heaven where Michael and his angels are fighting against this dragon that we have been introduced to in verses 1-6 and his minions or his angels as they fight and engage in battle and in verses 8 and 9. Satan is cast down and is defeated. And one wants to know when did this take place and what event is this referring to. I think the key is to read verses 10-12, and particularly verses 10 and 11: “then I heard a loud voice.” Voices in Revelation often interpret events so you’ll find certain persons, voices or heavenly hymns or angelic beings saying things. Often the speeches or voices in songs in Revelation interpret events that take place in Revelation. I think that verse 10 and 11 interpret this probably as Michael and his angels defeating the dragon and his “angels.” Verse 11: I’ll read it again: “then I heard a loud voice saying now have come the power and salvation and kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ for the accuser of our brothers who accused them for day and night has been hurled down.” This is 7 through 9. They overcame them (these accusers) which I take it are God’s people. They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony.
I think verses 7 through 9 is again a symbolic portrayal of the defeat of Satan and his angels at the defeat of Jesus Christ. The blood of the lamb, or the death of Jesus Christ was the ultimate defeat of Satan and his angels. And as I said, 7 through 10 is interpreted as this voice in 10 thru 12 further describes what is going on in 1 through 6. The true source of Satan’s death, then, is Jesus Christ on the cross. This further explains why he tries to devour the woman and as he tries to go over the woman and why she needs to be put in the desert to be rescued and secured is verse 12. The devil, the dragon, that has been cast down and is now filled with fury because he knows that his time is short.

So what we are going to read in the rest of 12 and 13 is a result of what happens in the first part of chapter 12. Satan has been defeated and cast down. He has been deprived of his ability to destroy the child. Now because he has been defeated, he has been cast out of heaven at the time of Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ, the death of Christ has spelled the defeat of the dragon. So now that his time is short he is going to release his wrath and fury on the woman and her offspring.

So that brings us to the rest of chapter 12. When the dragon saw he has been hurled down, now he goes after the woman, which we said symbolizes God’s people. Now the woman is probably more than just the people of Israel and now includes, as chapter 12 ends, those who keep God’s commands and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which would clearly be a reference to the new people of God, both Jew and Gentile, making up the church that belonged to Jesus Christ, and God’s people by virtue of belonging to Christ.

Now there is an interesting contrast going on here. Again, if we try to make sense of it at a literal level, we’ll result in doing one thing with it; but I think the best way of making sense of it is to read it symbolically. As the genre of Revelation asks us to read it, notice that there is a contrast between the woman and her offspring. If woman refers to the people of God, then who are the woman’s offspring? Are they someone else? Is the woman Israel and her offspring are someone else, the church perhaps? Or Gentiles? How are we to understand the woman and her offspring? Are these two separate entities?
If we read it literally that would seem to be the case but I think it is better to understand it in true apocalyptic fashion we need to read this symbolically. So the woman and her offspring (which doesn’t make sense at a literal level), however, at a symbolic level they probably both refer to the same thing. The woman and her offspring are probably both symbolic of the people of God. But they are probably symbolic of the people of God from two different perspectives. Notice as we have already said, the woman back in verse 6 flees to the desert, to a place already prepared by God, where she is taken care of for 1260 days. And then notice in verse 14: the dragon now goes off to the woman and says based on the fact that he was not able to destroy this child, Jesus Christ, who is to rule the nations with an iron scepter. Based on the fact it was through his death and resurrection that Satan has been destroyed, cast out of heaven and defeated. Now in his anger, he goes after this woman.

In verse 14, the woman was given two great wings like an eagle so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert where she would be taken care for a time, times, and half a time out of the serpents reach. So in both of these images you have the woman going to a place where she is preserved and taken care of, out of the reach of Satan. Yet after that happens, starting in verse 17, after all the attempts to destroy this woman, even when he could seem to get to her, the earth opens up and devours Satan’s attempt to destroy the woman. The woman is preserved; Satan can’t get at her. So he gets angry in verse 17 and goes after the rest of her offspring who apparently he is able to get at.

So what are we to make of this? If the woman and the children get at the same thing, how can Satan get at the offspring but not the woman? I think this is John’s way of showing that God’s people, the church, are kept and preserved, and ultimately Satan cannot get at them and destroy them. Yet, that’s the perspective of the woman, yet, from the perspective of her offspring God’s people might suffer for persecutions, some of them even death, yet ultimately God’s people, especially spiritually, cannot be harmed. Persecution cannot serve to destroy God’s relationship of God’s people to God himself. We will see ultimately, through new creation, that God will indeed vindicate his people.
so that ultimately, no matter how much Satan can cause problems for God’s people physically through persecution, from the perspective of the offspring, even though he can cause problems for the church physically and temporally, from the perspective of the woman, ultimately the church cannot be harmed or destroyed. They are still God’s people and he will keep his promises to them. So the woman and her offspring probably referred to the same entity, yet it’s looked at from two different perspectives. They’re preserved spiritually yet they are still subject to persecution at the hands of this dragon.

The last two things I want to talk about is, we have already talked about that number of three and a half years in verse 14 or time, times, and half a time. I have already suggested that this language should not be taken literally to refer to a specific time in the past or in the future but the three and a half years is symbolic of the entire time of the church’s persecution, starting in the first century. Again, John is trying to help the churches make sense of what it is they are experiencing under Roman rule, especially for Christians who are suffering but even for those who are not yet need to be aware of the need to stop compromising and embrace Jesus Christ no matter what the consequences. Now John is trying to help them understand the true nature of their conflict. I take it as the three and a half years is referring to the entire period of the church’s existence, as it struggles with persecution that is primarily instigated by Satan. It is the whole entire period of the church’s conflict with the world that John is now making clear as by no one but Satan himself.

One other thing to mention, to add to this story, is to go back to that reference to Satan in verse 9, where he is described as the serpent of old, making a clear inter-textual connection to Genesis chapter 3. I want to look at this text again, but first of all I want to read Genesis 3:15-16 and then with that text resonating in our ears go back to Revelation 12 and 13 and note possible correspondences. Now in Genesis 3, right after Satan tempts Adam and Eve to sin through deception. Notice it again in verse 9 of chapter 12 of Revelation, the dragon is called “the one who leads the whole world astray.” Satan is displayed primarily as a deceiver and that’s exactly how he gets Adam and Eve to sin, by deceiving them. But following that, God then begins to speak to the serpent and to the
A woman in verses 15 and 16. To the serpent he says, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” And then verse 16, to the woman he says “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe, in painful labor you will give birth to children.” Now keep all of those elements in mind and then go back and read Revelation chapter 12 and 13. Notice that it begins with a conflict between the woman and the dragon, a battle over her son. And even after the son is born the dragon goes after the woman. So that is the first person of the Genesis 3 verse 15. But then also note that the dragon ends up going not after the woman but after the woman’s seed, notice that language of seed. But then one could ask, doesn’t the dragon’s seed go after the woman’s seed? So this is where chapter 13 comes in of Revelation. These two beastly figures are the seed of the dragon. They are described just like him. He stands on the sea shore at the end of chapter 12 to summon them. So you have both of those elements: there is conflict between the dragon and the woman in chapter 12 and there is also conflict between the dragon seen in chapter 13 and the woman’s seen in chapter 12 and 13.

Notice that Genesis account, though, in 3:15 the bruising the heel which simply may refer to Satan going after the son. So he’s able to bruise his heel especially after the death of Jesus Christ. But then it says that “the woman’s seed will crush his head,” and the question is: where do we find the head of the dragon crushed? And in a way you could infer that the battle and defeat of Satan in Rev. 12:7-12 is the crushing of Satan’s head, but if you jump over to one of the dragon’s offspring, notice that beast number one, who is described just like the dragon, notice what is said about him. Verse 3 of chapter 13 describing this beast, it says “one of the heads of the beast seemed to have a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed.”

Now there may be other things going on, but it appears to me, two in particular. Number one I think this is a parody of Jesus Christ. In other words, it’s describing the beast in the same way that Jesus Christ was dead and is now alive like in Revelation. Now the beast appears to be able to mimic Christ, he’s so powerful. But second, I think this is probably an allusion back to the Genesis account. This is the crushing blow to the
head of dragon, through the crushing of the head of one of his followers, one of his offspring.

Also notice another interesting thing; at the beginning of chapter 12. Notice how the woman is described: she was pregnant and cried out in pain, as about to give birth. This probably reflects Genesis 3:16 and the promise that the woman would give birth through pain that she would give birth to children; that she would cry out in pain.

Now the question is: what is the significance of this? What might be the interpretive importance of this allusion to Genesis chapter 3:16? How does that make a difference in the meaning of the text? I think it might be this: we have already seen one of the things going on in chapters 12 and 13 where the author is trying to help his readers understand the true nature of their conflict, to go back to the era of Christians living in the Roman Empire, many of them facing hostility at the hands of Rome. This now is explaining the true nature of their conflict.

What John does is that he places their conflict in the first century in part of a larger story or narrative that goes all the way back to creation, as if John wants to tell his readers, what you are experiencing in Rome should not be a surprise; it’s nothing less than the age old conflict that goes all the way back to creation. What you see going on is simply this ongoing conflict that goes all the way back to the beginning of creation. Now you see it emerging again in your story, although the linchpin is the death blow. Satan is already defeated and he knows his time is short. The Christians in Asia Minor in the first century, and we might indeed say any Christians that find themselves in similar situations, can take heart because number one they know this is nothing less than an age old story with conflict that goes all the way back to creation. Second, Christ has already defeated the death blow and the enemy, the primordial enemy, Satan, and therefore his time is short. Therefore they can respond appropriately and they can hang on and not become overwhelmed and discouraged because now they are able to see their situation from a new perspective and in a new light.

So these chapters portray them and portray the true nature of the church’s struggle in the first century. Again empirically they look out and see the Roman Empire and the
pressure to conform and all that the Roman Empire does, but John then in true apocalyptic fashion portrays a different perspective and says that the things aren’t really as they appear. But behind what you see in the world is this age long struggle and even a heavenly battle that determines what is going on in the present. It helps them put their conflict in the context of God’s larger, bigger perspective for the world and his people.

In chapter 13, then, we are introduced to two of Satan’s cohorts, as he stands on the sea and summons two other followers that emerge from both the earth and the sea. These two beasts probably have their background in both the Old Testament. Sometimes you find beastly figures or dragon like figures. We looked at Isaiah chapter 51 in verse 9, the Rahab, the serpent that is pierced through, the serpent of the sea. As you find this idea of beast associated with the sea in apocalyptic literature also in the Old Testament sometimes you find the notion of two beasts, often labeled the Behemoth and the Leviathan. John may have that text and other texts in mind but he’s clearly drawing on other imagery taking beasts or dragon like figures and using them symbolically to refer to various persons and nations.

So when I read this text you need to first ask what is the meaning or connotation communicated by these beastly creatures and second, what might they do? So first of all, by using beastly serpentine dragon like figures, whether in the Old Testament or apocalyptic literature or even in Greco-Roman literature, a beast or a serpent like figure usually symbolizes features of evil and chaos, antagonism, destruction, everything opposed to life and order. So by portraying a beast, I think John wants to communicate those things, whatever he is referring to he wants to associate it to beastly figures of the past or these beastly figures in other literature, that is, those persons, or events, or nations associated with evil and chaos and which are inimical and demonic; that which is destructive.

The question is though, to what do the beasts in chapter 13 refer? Starting with the first one, I find it very difficult with the first one that a first century reader, and again, remember that Revelation is a letter, it’s a prophecy, it’s trying to communicate a message to the first readers to make sense of their situation. I find it difficult that a first
...century reader could identify this beast with anything or anyone other than first century Rome and perhaps the Roman emperor. So what the author is doing then is trying to get the readers look out in their first century context and see this glorious, colossal Roman Empire and see the emperor on this throne and he’s responsible for peace, blessings and prosperity and they are called upon to give him allegiance.

What is the effect of John’s portraying of the Roman Empire or the emperor himself as a beastly figure? It’s to get the readers to see that it’s not as it appears. Actually, what lies behind the Roman Empire and the emperor is this beastly figure that is associated with nothing less than the dragon, this age old serpent that goes all the way back to the creation narrative. In fact, notice how this beast is described, it says “men worshipped the dragon” because he had given authority to the beast. So the dragon in chapter 12 gives his authority to the beast and so the beast is kind of now the representative of the dragon and the sole goal is to point the people towards the beast. So this to be involved in Roman society and Roman commerce and participate in opportunities to worship and show allegiance to the emperor is not as innocuous as it seems.

Now John says “behind it is nothing less than worshipping the dragon himself.” But who is the second beast? In others words, beast number one is the empire, the emperor who demands worship, who rules over the entire earth in the form of the Roman Empire and perhaps the emperor. Who is beast number two? Most likely the second beast you’ll notice as you read verses 11 through 18 in Revelation 13 that the second beast is described much like the beast number one and also the dragon. Notice verse eleven: “he had two horns like a lamb but he spoke like a dragon.” So in a way, the beast number two is an offspring of the dragon and he represents the dragon. But it goes on and says “he exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf.” So the main function of the second beast, the beast from the land, in verses 11 through 18, is to point to and draw attention to and get people to focus on beast number one: the Roman Empire and the emperor. Most likely, beast number two symbolized the local elites who fostered and even demanded that people participate in pagan worship or even emperor worship, as a
form of participating in the local economy or the local temples that were built and existed in the seven cities to which Revelation is addressed. Most likely the second beast represents the elite or at least anyone who promotes worshipping or enforces worshipping the Roman Empire and the Roman emperor, through occasions for emperor worship. It is the whole system and imperial cult, even pagan worship directing attention to Rome, the goddess Roma. Probably beast number two would represent anyone who was responsible for enforcing persons to participate in that.

Verse 14 is an interesting one and in verse 13 it says, “He, the second beast, performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of people. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast, who was wounded by the sword, yet lived. Again the setting up of the image as the beast, is it possible that it refers to different local shrines set up in honor of the emperor? But what I want you to notice is the connection between deceiving again and the description of the dragon back in verse 9: “he leads the whole world astray.”

So at the heart of all that John is saying that as the people look out and see this colossal empire and all the benefits that it provides and all the glamour and glitter of the Roman Empire, what John wants to see is that this is part of the ploy, the deceptive ploy, that ultimately goes back to Satan himself, to deceive the readers into following the beast. They are attempting to deceive the readers into thinking that they can compromise their faith in Jesus Christ, their allegiance to Jesus Christ and God, by participating in the idolatrous system of the Roman Empire.

Now John, do you see what he is doing, is shedding a new light on what is going on in first century Rome. In fact, note that the second beast that is representing those who are in charge of promoting the first beast, the Roman Empire and emperor, they are able to even level economic sanctions in verse 16 and 17, for those who refuse to comply.
Comments on 666: Rev 13:18

Verse 18, I can hardly end without saying something about verse 18. This is the famous number 666 and there have been all sorts of wild things done with that. One instance I always like to tell is one time when I was living in Minnesota in the USA, I went to a Christian music festival and we had to have wrist tags to get in and they all had a number and for almost everyone the first 6 numbers were identical, but the last three were the ones that changed, that was your identification to leave and get back into the events. I looked at mine and the last three numbers were 666 and some individuals may have made a big deal out of that and even refused to wear something like that, but I think of that in terms of what is going on in this text and try to relate that to what is going on in our modern day phenomena. Sometimes someone might have a phone number with 666 or you will see license plates with 666 and what do we make of those things in light of what is going on in Revelation?

First of all, the first obvious principle to apply when thinking about modern day applications of this text is once again to evoke the principle of what John would have intended and what would have most likely been something that his readers could have understood and this in my mind rules all kinds of modern day speculations regarding computer chips that are imbedded in someone or credit cards or the internet or identifying specific persons like Saddam Hussein. All of that is far beyond the horizons of the first century author reader.

Furthermore, notice that this is not accidental, this is not just the coincidental occurrence of the number 666, especially when it comes after the number 665 and before 667, but this is an intentional receiving of this mark by those who will indeed pay allegiance to and even worship the beast. So these are not the 666 in Revelation 13. It is not just a coincidental appearance of the number, it’s an intentional act on the part of the reader who receives it and embraces it and participates in it whatever it is.

Let me say two things: number one, most likely this is to be seen symbolically as the counterpart of chapter 7, where the saints also receive a seal or a mark indicating their identification. The seal or the mark here, 666, is meant to indicate the true identification...
of the followers of the first beast, the Roman Empire or the emperor. But second, out of all the possibilities I think there are two that are compelling, is the number 666 probably corresponds to at least one spelling of the name of “Nero,” one of the more well-known Caesars. Revelation appears to have been written well after Nero, so what John may be doing is simply using Nero, who was known for his harsh treatment, his cruelty and his evilness, as a symbol or a model of what’s going on in the reader’s present day. 666 may be a way of them saying what’s going on is similar to what went on with Nero. It is written in the same once again representing evil and chaos, evil in an attempt to destroy God’s people now incarnated again with the Emperor and the situation that the readers face.

Second, it is also possible that 666 falls short of the perfect number 7, 666 corresponding to the evil trinity, the dragon, beast number one and beast number two that fall short of the perfect number of seven; perhaps falling short of the godly trinity of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

**Application**

But in any case, again to put this case together, Revelation chapters 12 and 13 function in the book to explore and explain, at a deeper level, in more detail, the true nature of the conflict of the people of the first century, and I would argue, any age. The pure nature of the conflict is not merely a physical one, but behind it lies a spiritual battle, a spiritual conflict, the tempts of Satan and his ability to revitalize this ongoing battle, his ability to inspire human persons and institutions to set themselves up as God, arrogantly as God, and to oppose and even kill God’s people. Chapter 12 and 13 then help us. They help God’s people come to grips with the true nature of the struggle and to be able to respond to it appropriately, to be able to resist ungodly oppressive powers but be able to persevere under pressure and even the ultimate price of martyrdom or death. In a sense the Revelation chapters 12 and 13 is a symbolic narrative of what Paul says in Ephesians 6 are “battles not in flesh and blood but against the powers and authorities and rulers of the heavenly realms.” Revelation 12 and 13 reminds its readers that your true battle is not with flesh and blood, not that it’s not a real battle, that is not what John or Paul is
saying, but the battle is not one of flesh and blood, with just the rulers and authorities of the earthly realm, of the Emperor or the Roman Empire, but your true battle is a spiritual one with the rulers and leaders in the heavenly realm which in true apocalyptic fashion, lies behind the earthly battles that you face. So knowing the true nature of the battle for the readers of the first century or any century, are better equipped to respond to any society or government or person that exalts themselves as God and to resist that but also to rise up and persevere and endure in the face of oppression and persecution.

So, this is one more example of how applications of various interpretive methodologies can help us to understand the text and to come to grips of its meaning in light of its original, historical context but also to apply avenues for how we relate that text to ourselves as God’s people who confess God’s word as inspired Scripture and through which God continues to speak to his people today.

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