We’ve looked at chapter 12 of Revelation and I’ve suggested that the primary function overall is to demonstrate or to show the true nature of the church’s struggle that is behind in true apocalyptic fashion which lifts the veil or the curtain so that the reader can see behind imperial reality to see another reality that is their reality expanded to include the heavenly reality. Now chapter 12 lifts the veil so the people can see behind their earthly conflict with the Roman Empire and to see the true nature of that behind their struggle lies Satan’s attempt to not only destroy the Messiah but now also to destroy the Messiah’s people. Chapter 12 clearly indicates that Satan has already been defeated and Christ’s kingdom has already invaded the kingdom of Satan. Satan now only has a short time to flail about and to wreak havoc on God’s people. So now they are able to see their situation in a new light and in a new perspective and respond accordingly.

Greco-Roman Backgrounds

But what I also want chapter 12 look at the chapter as a whole look at two more important features in understanding Revelation chapter 12. As far as what John may have some of the ideas and some of the notions he may have been drawing upon as he recorded this vision of the woman who is pregnant with a son and the son who is pursued. The woman is pursued by a dragon, a serpent figure that tries to devour the son and is frustrated or warded off from doing so. Intriguingly, this story in Revelation chapter 12 seems to reflect a number of common Greek or Roman myths about a woman who is with child and who is pursued by a dragon or a serpent type figure that tries to devour the child and the child is then usually rescued from the threat of the serpent figure. Often in the story what happens, in some versions of these stories, is the son then grows up and comes back and actually slays the dragon or slays the serpent type figure. For
example, there’s one story called Leto and Apollo and Python. It begins with Python who described or depicted in the story as a dragon who pursues Leto who was the goddess and Python pursues her in order to kill her. Leto then gives birth to a son which is the god Apollo. Apollo then later on comes back and defeats Python. There are a number of stories like that and John’s does not seem to resemble precisely any of them suggesting John may not necessarily be thinking of one specific story that he or his readers would have known about or would have been common in the Greek or Roman world. John’s story is very different in that his imagery indicates or represents something that happened historically the actual birth of Christ whereas theses other stories are stories about the gods and not necessarily referring to specific historical events. But John does not appear to be drawing on any particular one of these stories but may have simply been aware of this type of story and a number of versions of the story that his readers would have been familiar with.

Now John seems to draw on these as if to demonstrate the true embodiment of the stories that people recognize or held to or knew of in the Greek or Roman Empire. John draws on that to say, let me show you the true version of that. Now he uses that to depict historically of what happened in the person of Jesus Christ and also what is happening with the persecution of the churches that he is addressing. So again John is not necessarily agreeing with these stories or subscribing to them he is just using stories because they are fitting to describe what’s going on but also for him to demonstrate the true version or the true account of these stories that they may have known about. But, in any case, John is probably drawn on some common motifs or ideas from these stories and again most of them concern a woman who is about to give birth to a son and pursued by a dragon or a serpent type figure and that certainly fits exactly what John is depicting.

Old Testament Backgrounds

But there seems to me to be another important, maybe even more
important, background than that that John has drawn upon and that is an important Old Testament background. We’ve already seen that John is aware of Old Testament depictions of a dragon or serpent type figure, such as the sea monster to represent nations or evil rulers that have oppressed God’s people and that oppose God and that God is depicted as defeating them or slaying these dragon type figures. We see that in Psalm 74, Isaiah chapter 51 in verse 9 and there are other texts as well that portray a ruler or kingdom and a dragon type or serpent type language. God defeats those dragons as symbolic of the defeat of the nation or the oppressive ruler. But a more specific story I think lies behind this so that this may be another example of John drawing this time on a story that resonates both with the Greco-Roman background such as the late Apollo python and other Greco Roman stories. John is drawing on a story, constructs a story that resembles that Greco-Roman background but at the same time also resonates with the Old Testament story or Old Testament text.

Genesis 3 Background

The primary text that I have in mind goes all the way back to the beginning of the Old Testament and that is the book of Genesis and primarily Genesis chapter 3 and verses 15 and 16. The so called “proto-evangelium” as some have called it. But following the creation of humanity and placing Adam and Eve in a garden, they are warned against the consequences of disobeying God’s command to them not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A serpent deceives Eve and then Adam into eating the fruit of that tree, bringing a curse upon them just as God promised would happen. Then God addresses the situation starting in verse 15. God begins to address the serpent first of all which is Satan and then God addresses Eve. Beginning in verse 15, God addressing the serpent says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike [or bruise] his heel.” To the woman he said in verse 16, “I will greatly increase your pains in child bearing, with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will
be for your husband and he will rule over you.” Now what I want you to notice is how the key features of these two verses in Genesis 3:15-16 emerge in this story back in Revelation chapter 12 and in fact we’ll find that going on in several places throughout Revelation that this principle: just as it was in the beginning so it will be in the end as well. So we’ll see John often drawing a motif from Genesis to show just as it was true in the first creation in the very beginning that will be repeated again in the sense in the end. Just as it was in the beginning so it will be in the end. So for example, notice in chapter 12 and especially verses 3-9 we find the story of the enmity between the woman and the dragon as we find them both described in the story of how the dragon pursues the woman and even after that starting in verse 10 and following after that we find the dragon still pursuing the woman, although she is taken off into the desert in exodus language and preserved and protected there. But the section of Genesis 3:15 that promises enmity between the serpent and the woman now emerges here.

By the way John himself seems to draw us back to Genesis 3. When in Revelation 12:9 makes a point he makes a rather clear point to identify this dragon as the ancient serpent called the Devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray. Deception or leading astray is exactly what Satan did back in Genesis 3 in relationship to Eve and Adam. But notice the identification of this dragon as the ancient serpent or the serpent from of old, clearly linking back to Genesis chapter 3. So the serpent and the woman a conflict or enmity between the serpent of the woman from Genesis 3:15, lies behind the story of the dragon pursuing the woman in Revelation chapter 12.

The serpent bruises his heel we find again in chapter 12:3-9 the dragon figure, which is Satan, pursues the son and tries to devour him and later on especially in verse 17 of chapter 12 the dragon will go after the woman’s offspring; her seed to wreak havoc so that the part where the serpent bruises his head or the head of the woman’s offspring is clearly present in Revelation chapter 12.
Notice too that in chapter 3 verse 16 in Genesis it is said that the woman would give birth through birth pains its through pain that she would produce offspring. Notice how the woman in described in chapter 12 verse 2 of revelation. She was pregnant and she cried out with pain. Again this reflects that motif back in Genesis chapter 3 and 16.

The reference to the women’s offspring, we’ve already noticed occurs in numerous times not only in the form of the son but after that section in verses 10-
12 starting especially in verse 14 the dragon now pursues the woman into the desert. He’s frustrated from pursuing her and then at the end of chapter 12 the dragon goes after the offspring or the seed of the woman. So the promise that there would be enmity between her offspring the dragon’s or the serpent’s in Genesis 3 and her offspring is also represented in the dragon going after her offspring at the end of chapter 12 of Revelation.

Dragon’s Offspring

Now part of the promise in Genesis 3 was that there would be enmity not only between the serpent or Satan and the dragon but also between his offspring and her offspring. We’ve seen clear mentions of the woman’s offspring in chapter 12 that the dragon pursues at the end of the chapter and her offspring the son that he pursued but was thwarted from being able to devour he was deprived of his prey. Where does the dragon’s offspring or the serpent’s offspring from Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15 occur because again Genesis 3 promises there will be conflict between his, the dragon’s offspring or the serpent’s offspring, and her offspring. Where does the serpent’s offspring occur? I would suggest that this is where chapter 3 comes in. In the form of two beasts who resemble and are even described as and received authority from the dragon. In other words in chapter 13 we will be introduced to two dragon-like figures in the form of two beasts who are described just like the dragon. The first one is described as having seven heads and ten horns just like the dragon does. He even speaks like a dragon in verse 11. He exercises the authority of the dragon and the first beast, so I would propose that
the two beasts in chapter 13 are the offspring of the dragon from Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15. The seed of the dragon, and now we see the dragon seed in chapter 13 of Revelation and as we’ll demonstrate when we get there, I think it becomes clear that these two beastly figures, the offspring of the dragon are the means by which the dragon goes after the offspring of the woman. So chapter 12 ends with the dragon going after the woman’s offspring in fulfillment of Genesis 3, but now chapter 13 will show how he attacks the offspring. How is there enmity between the dragon and the woman’s offspring? It’s through his offspring, in chapter 13, these two beastly figures.

There’s one more intriguing part of sort of the story encapsulated in Genesis chapter 3, and actually when one reads the rest of the Old Testament, one can begin to see how Genesis 3:15 and 16 begin to work out, through the emphasis on the seed even through Abraham and into David’s line. The emphasis on seed and offspring but I think even in the text that we’ve seen like the Psalms and the book of Isaiah and where you have this beast, this sea-monster or dragon type figure lying behind the different nations and oppressive rulers. So ultimately you find this conflict between the dragon and his offspring and the woman’s offspring continuing right through the Old Testament.

Crushed Head

Now, the other feature of this story is encapsulated in Genesis 3:15 and 16 is the son would apparently crush his head. Interestingly, when we ask the question where do we see that, not that John has to pick up every last feature of the story, but where do we see this notion of the crushed head? I would suggest to you again when you look over at chapter 13. In chapter 13 and verse 3, the first beast, which is the offspring of the dragon, the first beast, is described this way: one of the heads, the seven headed beast, one of the heads seemed to have had a fatal wound, but that fatal wound was healed. We’ll talk a little more about that when we get to chapter 13, but this idea of the head having a fatal wound, probably does a couple of things, but also linking back to Genesis, chapter 3 and the promise that
the serpent’s head would be crushed. Now we find the serpent’s head crushed in the form of the beast, one of the head’s of the beast being dealt a fatal blow or a fatal wound, but the beast has recovered from that. So I would suggest to you then, that John is also drawing on it explicitly, because in chapter 10, verse 9, John clearly points us back to Genesis by describing the dragon as the ancient serpent of old. John is probably then meaning for us to read this text in light of the story in Genesis chapter 3, and perhaps all the rest of the Old Testament as well, the struggle that goes on in the rest of the Old Testament, but particularly back in Genesis 3:15 and 16 provides the subtext or the backdrop for reading this struggle as well. So what John has done then is, I think, constructed what he saw or his vision in a way that is once again is evocative of more than one background. It is evocative of some of Greco-Roman stories that readers would have been familiar with, in terms of a struggle between a female goddess giving birth to a son and a dragon type figure pursuing them, but also clearly resonating with Genesis chapter 3:15 through 19, with Jewish Old Testament background.

So the point of this then, the point of alluding particularly to the Genesis 3 background would simply again be to help the readers put their situation in a new perspective, to see that their struggle with Rome, this struggle that the church faces in the first century with the Roman empire and the struggle they face in any other century until Christ comes back, this struggle is nothing new. It’s simply part of an age old conflict that goes all the way back to creation, all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. Now this struggle in the beginning of Genesis 3 is simply resurfacing again in the form of the physical struggle they face with the Roman Empire. That struggle had surfaced at numerous points in the Old Testament and now is simply surfacing again in the struggle they face with Rome. So, once more, they can see their situation in a new light when they look out and see what’s going on in the empire. All they see is what goes on, from an empirical perspective, but now, by lifting the curtain, they see. No, this is not new. This is simply part of an age old struggle that goes all the way back to creation. It’s simply part of the age
old temptation of Satan to destroy the woman’s seed and to destroy the woman and to destroy her offspring as well.

The point of chapter 12 of Revelation is a resolution has already been reached in the struggle. The death blow has already been dealt; the crushing wound has already been administered. Satan has already been defeated because of the death and resurrection of Christ, Satan has already been defeated and cast out of heaven and now knows his time is short.

So what have the people to fear? What do the readers, those especially who are suffering because of their faithful witness, what have they to fear? Now they can see their situation in a new light. Those who are tempted to compromise must now realize what is really at stake, and whose side of the battle they want to be on.

Relation to Ephesians 6

One other issue relating to chapter 12 that might help us to understand what’s going on in light of what has just been said: Revelation chapters 12 and 13 as well, but particularly Revelation 12 could be seen in a sense as, I’m not saying John intended this, but for our perspective it might be helpful to draw the connection, but Revelation chapter 12 from our perspective could in a sense be seen as an expanded commentary on what Paul said back in the book of Ephesians chapter 6, verse 12 where at the end of the book of Ephesians, that famous spiritual warfare passage, where Paul describes the Christian life as a battle against the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms. He depicts the Christian response to that in terms of pieces of armor that are identified with certain virtues. There’s an interesting phrase in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 12, where Paul says, “your battle is not with flesh and blood, but with the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realms.” First of all, I think that reference to the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realm is a reference to demonic spiritual beings, as I think Paul uses that term all throughout Ephesians. But second, when Paul says that your battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realm--I don’t think he’s talking about two different things so that he’s demeaning
any physical conflict that we face. Paul’s not saying your battles are not against flesh and blood, so don’t focus on, or don’t worry about any physical battles or physical conflicts that you face. Again, especially for Christians trying to live out their life in the context of the Greco-Roman world, Paul’s not demeaning that saying that those are not significant battles but you need to instead pay attention to a different battle and that is a battle with the heavenly world.

I don’t think that’s what Paul is saying at all, I think Paul is saying something very similar to what John is doing in Revelation 12. When Paul says your battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities, I think Paul is speaking apocalyptically in demonstrating, as important and as true as those battles are on the earthly plain, behind them lies a more significant battle that is going on, that influences those battles. So you see Paul’s not saying, ignore those and focus on this. He’s trying to help them, in true apocalyptic fashion, come to grips with the true conflict and the true nature of the physical conflicts that they face with the Roman Empire. Behind those lies a greater conflict. Your battle is not with flesh and blood, your primary battle is not just what you face in the physical realm, as true and important significant as that is, but more significant is to help his readers of Ephesians understand the nature of, that is, to see, in true apocalyptic fashion that there is a battle behind that, that is being waged.

That’s exactly what Revelation 12 is doing. He’s saying your battle is not with flesh and blood, your battle is not just with the Roman Empire and the Caesar, and the Emperor over Rome, and all the local authorities and the cities of Asia Minor that are putting pressure on you to conform, that’s not your true battle. Behind that lies a battle that now John depicts in chapter 12 in Revelation, that is, the battle of Satan; that is, the attempt of Satan to defeat the Messiah, the battle that has now cast Satan out of heaven, and his attempt to destroy the woman and her seed.

So there’s a heavenly spiritual battle, the battle with the forces of evil that lies behind the true conflict that the churches in Revelation in 2 and 3 now face.
So that makes Revelation 12 again, a text that functions to unveil and uncover the true nature of the struggle—to show the churches their battle is not just with flesh and blood, with the Roman government, but your battle is with the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, primarily Satan himself. His attempt that goes all the way back to Creation, to try destroy God’s people, and God’s kingdom. Now with that new knowledge and perspective, the readers are able to see their situation in new light and to respond accordingly.

Chapter 13

Now that brings us to chapter 13. Chapter 12 actually ends, or depending on how different versions divide chapter 13 begins or chapter 12 ends, in the NIV, the paragraph division is actually chapter 13, verse 1. I’m not interested in exactly where we divide chapters 12 and 13, but chapter 13;1 begins with “And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.” What is going on here I think is, the dragon then stands on the shore of the sea to summon two helpers. So the dragon is going to summon two persons to help him, in pursuing the woman’s offspring. So notice, chapter 12 ends with the dragon’s failed attempt to get at the woman, he’s already failed at the son, Jesus Christ. Now he goes after the woman; now he goes after her offspring. We said both the woman and her offspring, both probably represent the church and the people of God from two different perspectives. On the one hand, they’re preserved and kept, and the other they’re still subject to suffering and persecution and the hands of Satan in form, in the first century at least, of the Roman government. Now the dragon stands on the seashore and his sole intention is to summon two helpers who will help him in his task of going after the woman’s offspring. I would suggest to you also that, probably we should not read chapter 13 of Revelation as chronologically following chapter 12. I think chapter 13 is simply a further way of describing in more detail how it is that Satan goes after the woman’s offspring. How is it that Satan wreaks havoc on the woman’s offspring even though she is preserved? Her offspring then is persecuted and Satan’s allowed to wreak havoc. How does he do that? He does it through the help of these
two beastly figures in chapter 13. So chapter 13 and 12, especially the second half of chapter 12, the first half, we said, actually most of that refers to past events, especially the birth of Jesus Christ. The rest of chapter 12 seems to bring us up until the present. So chapter 13, I think is simply another way of describing the exact same events of the rest of chapter 12.

It is not that chapter 12 happens first, and then after that chronologically chapter 13 happened. Chapter 13 is describing just in more detail, how does Satan accomplish what he does in chapter 12:14 through 17? How is it that he is allowed to persecute the woman’s offspring? He accomplishes this through two agents. In chapter 13, one of them is a monster or beast that comes out of the sea; another is a monster or beast that comes out of the land.

We’ll look at that and explain that in just a moment, but before we do, I want to read chapter 13. First of all, chapter 13, verse 1, “And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.” So now, he’s prepared to summon two other beastly figures, his two offspring from Genesis 3:15 to help and, “I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and the mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed after the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he gave authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast?’ ‘Who can make war against him?’ The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the
Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb that was slain [a reference back to chapter 5]. He who has an ear, let him hear. ‘If anyone is to go into captivity, in captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.’ This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and he made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. When he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of man. 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 and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all those who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast, or the number of its name. This caused for wisdom. If anyone has insight let him calculate the number of beast, for it is man’s number, his number is 666.”

Now let me make two observations about this passage before we look a little bit more in detail at the two beastly figures relating to the two beasts together. These two beasts are the focal points of this chapter. First of all, we’ve already noticed earlier in chapter 12 in reference to the dragon but also back in chapter 11 where a beast comes out of the Abyss and is able to slay the two witnesses who probably symbolized the entire witnessing church. So at one level chapters 12 and 13, especially 13, will be a further unpacking of that brief reference back in chapter 11 where after the witness of the two witnesses after their time of witness starting in verse 7 things begin to take a turn and a beast comes out of the Abyss and he’s able to slay the two witnesses.

Now we have a beast coming out of the sea in chapter 13 and there’s
probably connections between the sea and the Abyss as sort of referring to the same place. So that probably this beast coming out of the sea is a reference of the same thing that happened back in chapter 11 only now you have more detail. Now the author is going to unpack in even more detail the events that took place back in chapter 11. We saw there and in chapter 12 that a beastly figure or a monster type figure especially in association with the sea usually refers to or evokes the notion of evil, complete chaos and disorder and that which is evil and oppressive.

We saw also that throughout the Old Testament the authors have used a beast type figure or a sea monster type figure to refer to oppressive nations and governments or rulers who oppose God and who were idolatrous and who also oppressed God’s people. A classic example is Egypt and how Egypt or Pharaoh is often portrayed as a dragon type or serpent type figure, a sea monster figure emblematic again of chaos and evil and oppressing God’s people. Interestingly, though several apocalypses mention more than one beast. There are several apocalypses that mention two separate beasts or two separate monsters. One that comes out of the earth and one that comes out of the sea. The one that comes out of the sea is often labeled “Leviathan.” The one that comes out of the earth or land is often called the “Behemoth.”

Jewish Apocalyptic Backgrounds

For example, to turn back to some of the Jewish apocalyptic texts that John no doubt was familiar with and we’ve already seen that some of the images such as the number of saints that must be put to death and persecuted must be completed before the end, John may be drawing upon apocalyptic literature for that. But in 1 Enoch chapter 60 and verses 7-10 notice the text says on that day two monsters will be parted one monster a female named Leviathan in order to dwell in the Abyss of the ocean over the fountains of water. Notice the connection between the Abyss and the water. Another one a male called Behemoth which holds his chest in an invisible desert or on the land. So note in this 1 Enoch text the reference to the two monsters Leviathan and Behemoth, one that has its home
in the Abyss and in the sea, the other that has its home in the desert on the land.

We read something similar in 4 Ezra, another important and common apocalypse of 4 Ezra chapter 6. 4 Ezra chapter 6 beginning with verse 48, in one of Ezra’s visions starting with verse 49, “Then you kept in existence two living creatures. The name of one you called Behemoth, and the name of the other Leviathan. You separated one from the other [presumably at creation]. You separated one from the other for the seventh part where the water has been gathered together cannot hold them both. And you gave Behemoth, one part which had been dried up on the third day [referring back to Creation], that is, to live on it, where there are a thousand mounds. Behemoth belongs to the land. But the Leviathan you give the seventh part, the watery part, and you have kept them to be eaten by whom you wish, and when you wish.” So you have this imagery in the context of describing creation, you have this notion that the creation, God created these two sea creatures or sea monsters, one of them living in the water or the Abyss, the other two reside on the land. This might provide the model for John’s own description of these two sea creatures in addition to Old Testament text that he has been drawing on. John may be drawing on these apocalyptic texts and this notion of these two beastly figures or two monsters, one from the sea and one from the land. Although we’re going to see, John gives a very specific application. John is not just enslaved to sources, but his gives them a very specific application. It is also possible--let me back up and say, the mention of the first beast coming out of the sea, as well as the second beast coming from the land recall apocalyptic texts, but by having the beast come out of the sea, where earlier the beast came out of the Abyss, John clearly identifies this as a Satanic, demonic type figure.

Another possible connection to with the sea and land, is, by saying that this first beast comes out of the sea, and this next comment presupposes that if you are a Christian reading, living in the first century, I find it impossible that you would identify this beast with anything else but the Roman Empire. Once again because of the history this beast has in the Old Testament, in identification with pagan
oppressive rulers and regimes, it’s almost impossible to think that the first century
Christian reading this would not identify this with the oppressive regime, and even
the Emperor, that was in control during the first century. In their own lifetime that
was the Roman Empire and its Emperor.

But the other thing, by having one come from the sea and the other from the
land, it’s also possible that John had in mind along with the Old Testament and the
apocalyptic background from books like Enoch and Ezra, like beasts Leviathan
and Behemoth. The beast coming out of the sea would have recalled something
that would have come from, been separated by the sea, or come to them from
across the sea--that is Rome itself, and the emperor, whereas the beast from the
land may have recalled something on their own soil so to speak.

In the provinces of Asia minor, and we’ll discuss what possibly, the second
beast from the land could have indicated, but I’m convinced the first beast, like the
figure of a beast associated with the sea and the Abyss did in the Old Testament,
now symbolizes an oppressive pagan empire and its ruler, and that is the Roman
Empire. It’s difficult to tell if John had both in mind, is it both the Emperor and
Rome? Or is it referring to one or the other? In any case, I think the first beast is
meant to identify, or be identified with the Roman Empire.

Evil Trinity: Dragon, Beast and Second Beast

The second thing to say about this text, is as many have noted, John may
also be constructing an unholy trinity that functions as a parody to the true trinity.
Though the roles of all three are not neatly separated, but at the same time, notice
in chapter 1 and chapters 4 and 5, we were introduced to the trinity, that is, we saw
trinitarian references behind John's thinking. Even in the very beginning of chapter
1--the epistolary introduction, where John brings greetings from both God himself,
the one who is and is to come, and from Jesus Christ who has redeemed all
humanity to the kingdom, and from the Holy Spirit as well. We see in chapters 4
and 5, God seated on his throne, and we also see the seven spirits, seven being the
Spirit of God, but we’re also introduced to the land who was slain in chapter 5.
So Revelation is latent with trinitarian references so that, is it possible then that when we get to chapters 12 and 13, we’re meant to see an unholy trinity in a sense. We’ll see later on in chapter 14, the three are mentioned together, the dragon and the beast and the second beast which often is also called the false prophet, as well, in Revelation. So is it possible that John is constructing a parody of the true trinity in the form now of an unholy trinity?

So Satan then, clearly represents himself as God. Satan is the one who has the primary authority over the world, and over the other two beasts, then beasts number one, would be the one who, because he appeared to be slain and have a crushing wound, just like the Messiah did just like Jesus Christ who was slain back in chapter 5. Now beast number one is meant to be a parody of Jesus Christ. Then beast number two is a parody of the Holy Spirit, in that his main job, we’ll see, in the second part of chapter 13, is to get people to worship the first beast.

So it is possible that we have an unholy trinity—a perverted parody of the true trinity who now perverts their power and illegitimately claims the worship and authority that belongs only to God and his Messiah and the Holy Spirit.

Two Beasts

So, what I want to do now, is to begin to examine in a little more detail, the two beasts and some of the language that lies behind it, and how they might be functioning. We’ve already noted that the first beast comes out of the sea, which is just another name for the Abyss, back in chapter 11, verse 7, where the beast comes out of the Abyss. Later on in chapter 17, verse 8, the beast will come out of the Abyss again. I don’t think this is a different beast, nor should we make too much out of the sea distinction to the Abyss, unless we want to take the sea as also suggesting distance between the readers in Asia Minor and across the sea where they would find Rome. But other than that, the sea here symbolizes the notion of evil, it’s the home of the sea monster that we saw in Psalm 74, Isaiah chapter 51, both of those in the context of describing Pharaoh and the situation of the first Exodus. We’ve also seen too that in Revelation chapter 9, the locust come out the
Abyss--but also, Daniel chapter 7, where the beasts come out the sea. So Daniel 7 is also playing an influence here in chapter 13.

What you’re beginning to see is John likes to juggle several Old Testament texts at the same time. Often texts that have some kind of connection, verbally or thematically or contextually, John constructs sort of a mosaic where he takes a number of Old Testament texts and a little bit like a juggler trying to keep several balls going at the same time, or someone who is a circus performer trying to keep several plates spinning at once, John is juggling several Old Testament texts at the same time that bring with them meaning that helps say something and helps explain, and helps reveal and interpret what it was that John saw. Daniel chapter 7, as well as a number of Old Testament texts are part of that mosaic that now John constructs.

The fact that this first beast also has blasphemous names may clearly indicate that this beast is usurping the authority and the worship that only belongs to God and the Lamb in Revelation chapters 4 and 5. The emphasis here is on the idolatrous nature of this beast, and the Roman Empire, it may even more specifically reflect some of the claims of deity by Emperors. Domitian, for example, was known for accepting claims of deity and worship and honor that now John perhaps is drawing upon to demonstrate the idolatrous claims, the perverted claims of Rome in contrast to what should only be true of God and the Lamb in Revelation chapters 4 and 5.

We’ve already noted two, but I want to draw your attention again to the fact that this beast is described just like the dragon in chapter 12. He has seven heads and ten horns, both of them suggesting great power and great authority and great strength.

But what I want to draw your attention to is one unique thing that John does with this beast is John is clearly drawing on Daniel chapter 7 as we’ve already mentioned. When you go back to Daniel, in the Son of Man vision, before the Son of Man emerges, John actually sees four beastly figures all symbolizing and
representing four empires, or four emperors or rulers that lead up to and who’s kingdom is eclipsed by the Son of Man who now receives authority and receives a kingdom. Let me back up and turn back to chapter 13 of Revelation. Notice the beast is described in terms of not only his beastly character, in verse 2, “the beast I saw,” so John sees a beast, but then he describes him as resembling a leopard, a bear and also a lion. That roughly corresponds to the four images or to the four beastly figures, the four animal figures from Daniel’s vision in Daniel 7. The difference is Daniel saw four separate beasts representing four separate kingdoms leading up to the Son of Man, where now John combines all four of them into one beastly figure. It’s as if all past and all the kingdoms of the past have been combined and wrapped up into this final expression that has now emerged in the form of the first century Roman Empire. So it’s as if what John now sees happening, gathers up and even eclipses all the kingdoms and rulers of the past.

So what Christians face, what God’s people face now, is something more evil, more oppressive but what John then is doing is simply suggesting Rome is not all it appears to be. Again in true apocalyptic fashion he’s unveiling the true nature and character of Rome. Rome is not all it’s cracked up to be. Rome is not all it claims to be. It claims to be this wonderful colossal empire that has brought peace and prosperity and security to the people, but now John wants to demonstrate, that behind that is just the facade for the demonic Satanic beastly character of the an empire that is idolatrous, that opposes God, that opposes and oppresses God’s people. It maintains its empire through violence and bloodshed. So now John is unveiling the true nature of the Roman Empire--it is a hideous beast, and behind this beast lies Satan himself. Chapter 12, he’s described like Satan, seven heads and ten horns--this is Satan’s offspring from Genesis chapter 3, verse 15. So Rome is a hideous beast.

In chapter 13, in verse 2, it acts with the authority of the dragon. It’s appointed by the dragon to carry out his authority on earth, and though defeated, we saw Satan has already been defeated, because his time was short, he now acts
in fury and anger and now this is how he does it through oppressive, deceptive authority, and through the Roman Empire.

We also saw that one of the features of this beast is one of his heads appeared to be wounded and this gets repeated twice more in chapter 13. If you notice, the beast’s head appears to be wounded. We’ve already mentioned that this goes back to Genesis, chapter 3. But a couple of other texts, for example in Isaiah, chapter 27, verse 1, a text we’ve read, “In that day, the Lord will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword, Leviathan, the gliding serpent, he will slay the monster of the sea.” It’s interesting later on in chapter 13, the beast is described as one who received wound by a sword. This may reflect texts like Isaiah 27, also Psalm 74 that we’ve read a couple times. The idea is God slaying or piercing the monster. Isaiah 27:1 where clearly he slays the monster with the sword, that might lie behind Genesis chapter 3 as well. John may be thinking of this motif of slaying the monster and now the monster’s head appears to be slain in Revelation chapter 13, but also going back to chapter 3. What is important to demonstrate and understand is how John sees this wound or blow taking place. I think within the context, especially in light of chapter 5, and particularly in light of what we have said in chapter 12, as far as what is the historical context for Satan being defeated in heaven and cast down, it was the blood of Christ, or the death of Jesus Christ; Christ’s death and resurrection is the means by which Satan is defeated in chapter 12. I take it as that the context suggests that at the death and resurrection that the beast receives this death blow in fulfillment of Genesis 3, Isaiah 27, etc. The death and resurrection of Christ is what administered the death blow—the wound was fatal, but now the beast apparently has recovered from that wound. This is what causes all of creation now to worship him.

One other thing, and we’ll talk a little bit about that but before we do, is to recognize some have seen in addition to this notion perhaps of Old Testament of God piercing the dragon with the sword and the defeat of Satan at his, at the death
and resurrection of Christ. Now being responsible for the fatal wound of the beast, and the Genesis chapter 3 is a possible background.

In addition to that, some have suggested that this notion of the beast appearing to be dead, but now appearing to have recovered is a reflection of Nero’s death in 68 AD. As tradition has it, in 68 AD Nero fled and apparently committed suicide and that actually plunged the Roman Empire into civil war. It plunged it into conflict and chaos, but Rome apparently recovered from that and was apparently restored. Some have suggested then because of that, now the empire appeared to be invincible, it appeared to recover from a so-called death blow. Now, the empire appears to be invincible. That may be the case and we’ll look at a couple of other examples where John may be aware of this tradition surrounding Nero, especially the tradition surrounding his own death and suicide. We’ll look at a couple examples of that, might come into play.

But I want to be clear, although John may be drawing on that as a fear and understanding on the part, a connection with his readers, it’s important to understand that story does not dominate presentation. It appears to me that it is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is the controlling feature that deals the death blow. But John may be drawing on not only the Old Testament but stories surrounding Nero, to portray the Roman Empire as something that has been dealt a death blow but now has apparently recovered and apparently is invincible therefore causing the rest of the world to go after the beast, to worship the beast.

In the next session then we’ll look at a little bit more detail in terms of how does that work out? Particularly in relationship to the second beast, what does John think or how might this relate to the specific situation of the first century readers from Revelation chapters 2 and 3?