

Revelation:

It's Not What You Think It Is [Part 3]

Scene 4—Critique of the Empire/Alternative Vision of Community, Ch 12-15

NOTES: Beginning with chapter 12, the second half of the book is about the defeat of evil. Different aspects of the unjust Roman imperial system—personified as Satan and his agents—are defeated in reverse order of their introduction. Satan is introduced in chapter 12 and is defeated in chapter 20. The beast from the sea and the beast from the earth, together representing Rome's military/political system and its local collaborators, are introduced in chapter 13 and then defeated in chapter 19. The whore of Babylon, representing Rome's predatory economic system, is introduced and defeated in chapters 17-18.

Revelation 12 is the story of the woman, her child, and a dragon. This deeply symbolic story represents the life-and-death struggle against evil that is at the heart of the book. They gave hearers hope and courage to persevere in witness.

Revelation does not proceed chronologically. Even though these stories come in the middle of the book, they are most likely flashbacks to the past—to Jesus' victory on the cross—in which Satan and evil were already defeated. Revelation uses highly pictorial and visionary language to communicate spiritual truths.

Chapter 12: A Woman, A Child, and a Dragon—[1] Then a great 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. [2] She was pregnant, and she cried out because she was in labor, in pain from giving birth. [3] Then another sign appeared in heaven: it was a great fiery red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven royal crowns on his heads. [4] His tail swept down a third of heaven's stars and threw them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that when she gave birth, he might devour her child. [5] She gave birth to a son, a male child who is to **rule all the nations with an iron rod**. Her child was snatched up to God and his throne. [6] Then the woman fled into the desert, where God has prepared a place for her. There she will be taken care of for **one thousand two hundred sixty days**.

NOTES: John borrows and subverts a popular mythological story of his day, familiar from multiple Roman, Egyptian and Hellenistic (i.e. Greek) variations. The story of the birth of the god Apollo to the goddess Leto, and their escape from the dragon Python, was a favorite of Roman emperors who identified themselves with Apollo. By scripting the emperor as the dragon, John used the story to assert Jesus' lordship rather than the emperor's.

John reworks the story to make it a story about Jesus. The child is depicted as the Messiah of Psalm 2, who will "rule all the nations with an iron rod." The woman probably

does not represent Mary but is a larger symbolic depiction of Israel, the whole people of God, depicted in cosmic terms.

John models the dragon on earlier political references to foreign nations as "dragons" [Ezek 32:2, Psalms of Solomon 2:25], combined with the deceptive serpent of Genesis 3 and the ten horns from Daniel's fourth beast [Dan 7:7]. The woman flees from the dragon and into the wilderness, a familiar biblical place of refuge for the Israelites.

- 12 stars = 12 tribes of Israel
 - 1,260 days = 42 months = 6 (that which falls short of perfection) X 7 (perfection, holy)
This represents a clash between the powers of good and evil.
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Chapter 12: The Story Continues—[7] Then there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, [8] but they did not prevail, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. [9] So the great dragon was thrown down. The old snake, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, was thrown down to the earth; and his angels were thrown down with him.

[10] Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say, "Now the salvation and power and kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ have come. The accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them day and night before our God, has been thrown down. [11] They gained the victory over him on account of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their witness. Love for their own lives didn't make them afraid to die. [12] Therefore, rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them. But oh! The horror for the earth and sea! The devil has come down to you with great rage, for he knows that he only has a short time."

After the woman and her son flee into the desert, John ends the story with this word of encouragement: [17] So the dragon was furious with the woman, and he went off to make war on the rest of her children, on those who keep God's commandments and hold firmly to the witness of Jesus.

NOTES: The angel Michael is familiar from Daniel [Dan 10:21; 12:1]. Satan is familiar as a biblical name given to the personification of evil and deceit as an "accuser," especially in Job. Those who hear this story are told they live in an in-between time, symbolically pictured as the the and space between Satan's expulsion from heaven and his being thrown down into the abyss [Rev 20:3,10].

Chapter 13: The Dragon and the Beast—[12:18] Then the dragon stood on the seashore, [1] and I saw a beast coming up out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads. Each of its horns was decorated with a royal crown, and on its heads were blasphemous names. [2] The beast I saw was like a leopard. Its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. The dragon gave it his power, throne, and great authority. [3] One of its heads appeared to have been slain and killed, but its deadly wound was healed. So the whole earth was amazed and followed the beast. [4] They worshipped the dragon because it had given the beast its authority. They worshipped the beast and said, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

[5] The beast was given a mouth that spoke boastful and blasphemous things, and it was given authority to act for **forty-two months**. [6] It opened its mouth to speak blasphemies against God. It blasphemed God's name and his dwelling place (that is, those who dwell in heaven). [7] It was also allowed to make war on the saints and to gain victory over them. It was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. [8] All who live on earth worshipped it, all whose names hadn't been written—from the time the earth was made—in the scroll of life of the Lamb who was slain. [9] Whoever has ears must listen: [10] If any are to be taken captive, then into captivity they will go. If any are to be killed by the sword, then by the sword they will be killed. This calls for endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

NOTES: In Chapter 13, John critiques a web of empire-worship institutions by portraying the Roman Empire as a tool of Satan—a bold portrayal since Rome was still very much in power. John links the leaders of the empire with the images of two monstrous beasts in order to critique Rome's ideology of power.

John's beast from the sea incorporates aspects of all four on Daniel's beasts. It's seven heads and ten horns are identical to those of the dragon in Rev 12:3. The head that has suffered a mortal wound should probably be with the emperor Nero. After Nero's death in 69 CE, the Roman Empire had fallen into chaos, but then recovered, becoming even more invincible with the Flavian emperors, including Domitian. People become enthralled by Rome's power; thus John depicts them crying out "who is like the beast."

Chapter 13: Beast Number Two—[11] Then I saw another beast coming up from the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it was speaking like a dragon. [12] It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence. It also makes the earth and those who live in it worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. [13] It does great signs so that it even makes fire come down from heaven to earth in the presence of the people. [14] It deceives those who live on earth by the signs that it was allowed to do in the presence of the beast. It told those who live on earth to make an image for the beast who had been wounded by the sword and yet came to life again. [15] It was allowed to give breath to the beast's image so that the beast's image would even speak and cause

anyone who didn't worship the beast's image to be put to death. [16] It forces everyone—the small and great, the rich and poor, the free and slaves—to have a mark put on their right hand or on their forehead. [17] It will not allow anyone to make a purchase or sell anything unless the person has the mark with the beast's name or the number of its name. [18] This calls for wisdom. Let the one who understands calculate the beast's number, for it's a human being's number. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

NOTES: Imagery of the throne and worship is central to John's critique of Rome. The whole earth now follows the monstrous beast and "worships" its imperial system. The beast's throne and worship are a mockery of God's throne and the worship scene of chapter 4. Satan and the two beasts also form a demonic trinity that parodies the Holy Trinity.

The mark of the beast probably refers to the image of the emperor on Roman coins, or to some other economic aspect of the empire. Rome's predatory economic system will be critiqued as the whore of Babylon in chapters 17-18. The meaning of "666" should be clear by now. $6 + 6 + 6 =$ ultimate imperfection. However, a Hebrew practice of assigning numerical value to transliterated letters of the alphabet may be intended to calculate the sum of numbers to refer to a specific emperor's name—most likely Nero.

Chapter 14: Alternative Vision of Community—[1] Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion. With him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. [2] I heard a sound from heaven that was like the sound of rushing water and loud thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. [3] They sing a new song in front of the throne, the four living creatures, and the elders. And no one could learn the song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth. [4] They weren't defiled with women, for these people who follow the Lamb wherever he goes are virgins. They were purchased from among humankind as early produce for God and the Lamb. [5] No lie came from their mouths; they are blameless.

[12] This calls for the endurance of the saints, who keep God's commandments and keep faith with Jesus. [13] And I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write this: Favored are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "so they can rest from their labors, because their deeds follow them."

NOTES: Revelation 14's vision of the people of God constitutes a bold response to the realities depicted in chapter 13. This chapter shapes the identity of the people of God as an alternative community of followers to the Lamb, in contrast to the community of the beast. Like the interludes after the sixth seal and sixth trumpet, Revelation 14 functions to encourage churches to see their role in God's spiritual battle of salvation and judgment. This chapter may be viewed as the literary and theological center of Revelation.

Chapter 14: Vision Continued—[14] Then I looked, and there was a white cloud. On the cloud was seated someone who looked like the Human One [i.e. Son of Man]. He had a gold crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. [15] Another angel came out of the temple, calling in a loud voice to the one seated on the cloud: “Use your sickle to reap the harvest, for the time to harvest has come, and the harvest of the earth is ripe.” [16] So the one seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

[17] Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. [18] Still another angel, who has power over fire, came out from the altar. He said in a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, “Use your sharp sickle to cut the clusters in the vineyard of the earth, because its grapes are ripe.” [19] So the angel swung his sickle into the earth, and cut the vineyard of the earth, and he put what he reaped into the great winepress of God’s passionate anger. [20] Then the winepress was trampled outside the city, and the blood came out of the winepress as high as the horses’ bridles for almost two hundred miles.

NOTES: The vision of the "Human One" hearkens back to Rev 1:13 and Daniel 7:13. The two stage harvest draws on Joel 3:13. The first stage—the grain harvest of earth—is likely a positive image for the community's ingathering, similar to Mark 4:29 and John 4:35-37, recalling the Lamb's community as the "first fruits" of the harvest. By contrast, the second stage of grape harvest brings terrifying judgment. The image of treading the winepress of the fury of God's wrath draws on Isa 63:3-6. The judgment is executed not by God but by an angel—thus tempering the Isaiah imagery. The bloodbath up to the horses's bridle is a standard apocalyptic image.

Chapter 15: Victory Song— [1] Then I saw another great and awe-inspiring sign in heaven. There were seven angels with seven plagues—and these are the last, for with them God’s anger is brought to an end. [2] Then I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire. Those who gained victory over the beast, its image, and the number of its name were standing by the glass sea, holding harps from God. [3] They sing the song of Moses, God’s servant, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and awe-inspiring are your works, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, king of the nations. [4] Who won’t fear you, Lord, and glorify your name? You alone are holy. All nations will come and fall down in worship before you, for your acts of justice have been revealed."

NOTES: John remaps the story of the Exodus onto his own community. The who have refused to participate in Rome worship are metaphorically linked to the Israelites who crossed through to the other side of the sea. The community stands at the shore of the sea of glass, like the Israelites on the shore of the Red Sea. Jesus the Lamb is scripted in the role of Moses. Brutal Rome becomes the new Egypt from which God's people must escape. Their new song of victory hearkens back to the song Moses and Miriam taught the Israelites [Exod 15] combined with imagery from the Psalms [Ps 86:8-10; 98:1-2]. The reference to those who conquered the beast makes a bold claim for God's people. In contrast to Rome's violent conquest, God's people have conquered by their faith and endurance.

Scene 5 — The Bowl Plagues, Ch 16

[1] Then I heard a loud voice from the temple say to the seven angels, "Go and pour out the seven bowls of God's anger on the earth." [2] So the first angel poured his bowl on the earth, and a nasty and terrible sore appeared on the people who had the beast's mark and worshipped its image. [3] The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and the sea turned into blood, like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died. [4] The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and springs of water, and they turned into blood. [5] Then I heard the angel of the waters say, "You are just, holy one, who is and was, because you have given these judgments. [6] They poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. They deserve it!" [7] And I heard the altar say, "Yes, Lord God Almighty, your judgments are true and just."

NOTES: The seven bowl plagues repeat the seven trumpets of Revelation 8-9, with even more destructive intensity. Their effects target the four elements of the cosmos, including earth, sea, rivers, and air. Their destruction is double that signaled by the trumpets. Yet, it is important to note that these are not universal plagues against all of humanity, but only targeted against the beast and its followers. Notice that the pouring out of each bowl's contents of judgment reciprocates Rome's own shedding of blood, both described by the same verb. Measure for measure, God's judgments against evildoers match their offense. John borrows heavily in these plagues from the Exodus story and the 10 plagues that were visited on the Egyptians.
