

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

The Significant Signs (Revelation 12 to 14)

We have now arrived at the heart of the book. Paul Spilsbury entitled his "Reader's guide to the Book of Revelation," *The Throne, the Lamb and the Dragon*.¹ That is a good title. Whatever else we say about the book, it is a portrayal of the cosmic battle between the Lamb and the Dragon. This takes place against the background of the ever-present throne. As we focus on a significant development in the book we will endeavour to interpret it by referring to the very clear teaching found elsewhere in the New Testament.

I must remind you that the Revelation is probably the most misunderstood book in the Bible. That is because it has been treated as a celestial timetable, with little or no regard to its original setting or its literary genre. Its symbols and the purpose of the round numbers have been misunderstood. Nations and political leaders have been identified as have helicopters and gas masks, heavy artillery and nuclear warfare. This can be riveting stuff but it's not what the book is about. The scenes in the book depict reality, but we must not assume that the scenes in chapters 8-11 follow the scenes in chapter 6-7 *chronologically*. The sections of the book run parallel to each other. No attempt is made to map out human history or to give us a blow-by-blow account of the last seven years of this age.

Instead, by means of important symbols, God gives an insight into what was really going on behind the scenes at the end of the first century, what is going on right now and what will happen in the future. Most importantly, he shows us in symbolic language how it will all end: the Dragon is defeated; his instruments are judged, and the Lamb, who has been at the centre of the throne all along, is triumphant. Even when evil appears to be rampant, it is not because things are out of God's control. God's people have often had to suffer and are encouraged to be faithful. But, on account of the suffering of the Lamb, they are redeemed and through their suffering and courage, they triumph. Ultimately, evil is eliminated, God makes all things new, there is perfect harmony as (a redeemed) humanity enjoys unsullied fellowship with God in the holy city. All this takes place at the coming of the Lord. Appropriately, the last words of the Lord to his embattled people is, "Surely I come quickly!" And our response is: "Even so, come Lord Jesus."

¹ Paul Spilsbury, *The Throne, the Lamb and the Dragon* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

Description

Think of a little congregation, say in Philadelphia. They're much nearer to John's way of thinking and speaking than we are; they can hear 'in their mind's ear' the very lilt of his voice - they're much more familiar with the apocalyptic style of writing - a style which uses pictures and symbols to convey spiritual truth - than we are. They gather in someone's home on the Lord's Day. As the letter is read aloud to them, they're hanging on every word. When the reader comes to the end of the paragraph they're wondering "What happens next?"

As they listen, a rather frightening scene is depicted. The setting is heaven. The scene is introduced by flashes of lightening, rumbling, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hail storm.

A Woman

They see a woman, gloriously clothed. The sun is her garment, the moon her footstool, and she is wearing a glistening crown comprising twelve stars. But she is crying out because she is in labour and is about to give birth to a son who is destined to rule the whole world (12:1).

The Dragon

But, horror of horrors, there, right before her, is an enormous red dragon. Think of a winged serpent, with crested head and destructive claws, cruel and savage. It has seven heads and ten horns, and there is a crown on each head. So immense in size is the dragon that its mammoth tail, lashing across the sky, sweeps away one third of the stars of heaven and flings them to the earth (12:3-6).

The Birth

This dragon has only one thing in mind. It wants to gobble up the child as soon as it is born. But before it can do this the child is caught up to God and to his throne and the woman flees into a hiding place in the desert prepared for her by God (12:2-6).

The War

This event precipitates a huge war in heaven. Michael, the archangel, and his angels attack the dragon and his angels. But the dragon is defeated and he and his emissaries are cast out of heaven (12:7-12). John comments:

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 (12:9).

The Loud Voice

A loud voice then resounds in heaven saying:

Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of 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"
(12:10-12).

The Dragon's Fury

The dragon then pursues the woman who gave birth to the male child, bent on her destruction. But the woman is given the wings of an eagle and is kept out of the dragon's reach. The dragon attempts to drown her by spewing a torrent of water from its mouth, but somehow the earth swallows up the water and the woman's life is spared. So enraged is the dragon that it goes off to make war against the rest of the woman's offspring - "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 12:13-13:1).

Here is how the dragon vents his wrath. He employs three agents. We see him standing upon the shore of the sea.

- *The Monster from the Sea*

The apostle sees a monster of indescribable horror emerging from the water. He first catches sight of the horns. There are ten of them and there is a crown on each one. Then the seven heads appear, each containing a blasphemous

name. We are struck by the similarity of the beast to the dragon itself, at least in regard to the heads and the horns. As the body comes into view, it is that of a leopard, large and fierce and swift to spring on its prey (cf. Dan 7:6; Hosea 13:7; Hab 1:8). When it comes up out of the water, John notices that it has the feet of a bear. It is ready to rend and tear and to crush its enemy with its terrible claws. The mouth is mentioned last because it is the main point of the figure. This horrible beast has a mouth of the lion; growling and roaring, it is anxious to destroy.

All of humankind seems enamoured with the beast. The dragon has given the beast his power and his throne and this seems to captivate the masses. There had been what seemed like a fatal wound on one of the heads but the wound had been healed. Not only did the beast utter the most outrageous blasphemy - he also exercised his great power against God's people and subjected them to intense suffering and persecution. But this was for a set period only (13:10-8). John comments: "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (13:9-10).

- *The Beast from the Land*

Another beast appears, this time from the countryside. Unlike the first beast, it almost looks innocuous. It has two small horns like a lamb. But its appearance belies its true nature. It speaks like a dragon! Its mission is to enhance the reputation of the first beast and it does this by spectacular pseudo-miracles. It attempts to persuade or coerce everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive the mark of the beast on his right hand or forehead so that no-one could buy or sell without the mark "which is the name of the beast or the number of his name (13:11-17). Then comes the comment that continues to give rise to speculation and not a little sensationalism: "This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man's number. The number is 666 (13:18).

- *The Prostitute*

In chapter 14, a third agent is introduced (and subsequently described in chapter 17 and 18). This time we see not a ferocious monster nor a deceptive beast, but a prostitute who intoxicates people with her seductive charm.

Explanation

Let's confine ourselves to the most basic of interpretations at this stage. (This, by the way, is how we should approach the book. First we ascertain the meaning of the obvious symbols and only then do we attempt to fill in the details. In this way, the main message remains intact even if we differ on the less important particulars).

The Woman

At first sight, the woman who gave birth to a son seems to represent Israel (cf. Gen. 37:9-11). It is, however, worth at least considering the suggestion that she depicts the people of God in both testaments. Some commentators have argued that the description prevents us from identifying her simply as Israel even though she has a crown of twelve stars on her head. On the other hand she cannot simply be a church, since the church as such cannot realistically be portrayed as the mother of its founder.

For example, Michael Wilcock comments:

She is not simply Mary, the actual mother of Jesus; nor Mary's ancestress, Eve, whose offspring was to be the serpent's great enemy (Gen 3:15); nor even all mothers in the chosen line between them. For regarded as a 'sign', she is adorned with the splendour of sun, moon, and twelve stars, which in a parallel Old Testament dream (Joseph's in Gen 37:9-11) represent the whole family of Israel. What is more, she continues to exist even after Christ's ascension, and lives for 'one thousand two hundred and sixty days, the whole period of church history from his first coming to his second. (Wilcock believes he has previously established this fact). She is in fact the church: the old Israel, 'the human stock from which Christ came' (Rom 9:5; Knox), and the new Israel, whom he has now left in order to go back to the Father - though he has not left her comfortless, because like those previously noted symbols of God's church, Moses and Elijah (the two witnesses; 11:1-12, cf. Ex 15, 16, 1 Kings 19), she finds in the desert of the world a place of safety and the provision of her needs.²

There really isn't a problem here. From our perspective we may distinguish sharply between Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New. From God's perspective there is no such disjunction. The church is seen as the Israel of God (Gal 6:16). It fulfils now the task assigned to Israel in the Old Testament (Ex 19:5, 6; 1 Pet 2:9, 10). New Testament believers have been grafted like wild olive branches into the cultivated olive tree - representing Israel (Rom 11:13-24). It is not by accident that the New Jerusalem has gates which bear the names of twelve tribes (the patriarchs of Israel) and walls whose foundations are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles (Rev 21:12-14; cf. Eph 2:19-22).

The Son

² Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 118-119.

It is even easier to identify the son born to her, since he is destined to rule the nations (Rev 12:5; cf. Ps 2; Dan 7:13, 14; 1 Cor 15:25; Rev 19:15, 16). This is undoubtedly the Lord himself.³

The Dragon

The dragon symbolises Satan, as is clearly stated in verse 9 (Rev 12:9). The dragon has one fixation. He is implacably opposed to the child and wants to destroy him. Unable to do that, he focuses his attention upon the Church. Prevented from destroying the Church as such, he does all he can to make the lives of its individual members impossible.⁴

His Agents

To do this he uses various instruments. Much debate has taken place concerning the precise identity of the evil trio of the monster from the sea, the beast from the land and the prostitute. Whatever one's views about particular manifestations of these villains, they clearly represent important powers that have opposed God and all that is good. Satan uses tyrannical and blasphemous power to terrorise and oppress. The first beast is a picture of how low the state can sink when it arrogates power to itself and abuses this power, when its self-interest plays into the hands of Satan, when instead of acting as God's servant to do good (Rom 13:4), it is manipulated by Satan for whom power is an obsession. The work of the first beast is advanced, more than we can know, by false religion and ideology. These two diabolical animals make a formidable combination since through antichristian ideology the false prophet succeeds in mesmerising and beguiling people. The third member of the evil trio (the prostitute) uses glitter and sensuality to impress and seduce. The first readers would have seen, in these pictures, representations of Rome. Bruce Metzger emphasises the original significance of the references:

This beast symbolises the Roman Empire, which in John's day was the embodiment of Antichrist, a world power in opposition to the reign of Christ. The beast, we are told, "opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God" (13:6), reviling his name and his heavenly dwelling. We know what this means. Beginning with Julius Caesar, Roman emperors had been deified, that is, they were given status and worship due to a god, the early ones after their death, but later emperors even during their

³ Some writers have argued that the male child describes the 144 000. This is because they fail to understand the nature of the book and are compelled to force an unnatural interpretation on the text. Since they see the events of the book as describing sequential events that take place in the last seven years of the age, the male child cannot be Christ but must be somebody or something that originates in the last seven years of the age.

⁴ Understandably, many those who believe that the woman refers to Israel would understand the dragon's wrath to be directed at the Jewish people, in which case they would interpret "the rest of her offspring" (12:17) to mean New Testament believers as distinct from Israel.

lifetime . . . The Emperor Domitian required that people address him as "our lord and god." In most of the cities to which John was writing, temples had been built to these "deities" - a mockery of the heavenly dwelling of the one true God.⁵

With reference to the second beast (the false prophet), Metzger remarks:

With a grim parody John describes the beast as having "two horns like a lamb" - that is, it has taken on the guise of God's chosen one, yet "it spoke like a dragon (13:11). This agent of the dragon promoted the worship of the emperor by means of all kinds of spectacular tricks of bogus religion (13:13-15), even causing the image of the first beast to appear to be alive.⁶

This would have been their initial identification. But the manifestations of blasphemous power, false ideology (religion) and beguiling glitter (the prostitute) are not confined to ancient Rome. They recur in different forms during the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ.

Our attention is not so much on the deadly trio as upon the dragon who inspires them. Evil will often seem to be triumphant in the present age. Think of the effect that the remainder of the book would have on Christians living at the time of writing. They are told: "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (13:10), but they are then presented with contrasting pictures (the Lamb and the 144 000, the announcements of the three angels and the voice from heaven 14:1-13). This is followed by the announcement of "the harvest of the earth", depicting judgment (14:14-20). Again we hear the refrain: "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (14:12). Notice that the dragon and the evil trio introduced here are later dealt with in reverse order. In the rest of the book we read of how God deals first with the prostitute, Babylon, then with the beast from the sea - the Antichrist, then with the beast from the land - the False Prophet, and then finally, with the Dragon himself.

A razor-sharp sickle

The vision concludes with one "like a son of man" seated on a white cloud with a crown of gold upon his head and a razor-sharp sickle in his hand. It is harvest time and he is coming to settle the question of evil once and for all (Dan 7:14; Mt 13: 29, 30, 40-43;

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 75.

⁶ Ibid.

24:30, 31).

The Dragon's Attack on the Child

Prior to the his birth

Prior to the Lord's coming Satan did all he could to destroy the nation of Israel, the tribe of Judah and the family of David.

At Bethlehem

When Jesus was born, Herod attempted to take his life. In doing so he was aligning himself with the Dragon's purpose.

The Temptation

During the temptation in the wilderness Satan attempted to destroy the Lord's mission completely. Had he succeeded, the effect would have been the same as if the Dragon had swallowed the child at birth.

Judas

After employing every foul stratagem that he could, Satan "entered into" Judas (Jn 13:27) and hounded Jesus to the cross, not knowing (or accepting) that he was contributing to his own destruction.

The defeat of the Dragon

We usually emphasise that on the cross Jesus paid the price for our salvation. Quite rightly, we stress that his death was a substitutionary sacrifice. But there is something else we need to know. **On the cross the Dragon was dealt a death blow.** The decisive victory was won in the battle against evil. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus shared our humanity so that "by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14). Paul explains that at Calvary he not only forgave our sins but "disarmed the powers and authorities (and) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col 2:15).

The "honourable" way

We don't know exactly how evil originated but we do know that it will be eliminated. God is doing it in the 'honourable' way. The lust for power and the unlawful use of power is at the heart of the problem of evil. How appropriate that, in ridding the universe of evil, God does not resort simply to the use of his superior might. He takes no unfair advantage. He does not fight fire with fire. He destroys opposition without in any way transgressing the demands of his own holiness. Power does not have the last word; goodness does. Might only enforces what has been established through holy love.

The Present

The War Continues

The decisive battle has been won. The outcome of the war is certain. But the war is not over yet. And, whether we like it or not, we are part of the cosmic conflict. Even now "(our) enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). Paul warns us that he sometimes "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). He is usually more dangerous when he is in disguise. We ought always to remember that our real battle is not against "flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

Pressing home Christ's victory

Here we need to be balanced. Some people are fascinated by the concept of spiritual warfare. Anything esoteric or metaphysical fascinates them. But let's not err at the other extreme. According to Scripture we are engaged in spiritual warfare. Most importantly, we are thoroughly equipped for the battle. James tells us that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us (Jas 4:7). The Lord was most emphatic about the inability of the powers of evil to overcome His church. The gates of Hades will not overcome the church which he himself builds. *Spiritual* authority has been committed to the church which exercises its mandate in obedience to God's will. To it he commits the keys to the kingdom of heaven; whatever it binds on earth is bound in heaven and whatever it looses on earth will be loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19; 18:18-20). In the light of the fact that we are "up against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms," we should put on the full armour of God. And this armour covers us from head to toe - the helmet of salvation to feet that are shod with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. The protective gear helps us to withstand every attack, but we are also given an invincible offensive weapon - the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6:17). In other words, "Though we live in the world we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (II Cor 10:3, 4).

So, the decisive battle has been won. Ultimately, complete victory is assured. We may not understand exactly how evil could have arisen in a universe created perfect, but we do know that it will ultimately be eliminated. The outcome of the war is certain, but right now the battle is still raging and, whether we like it or not, we're part of the cosmic conflict. As we engage in the battle, let's keep in mind Paul's amazing statement, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom 16:20).

Over that page is a brief outline of the section we have covered.

The Revelation of Seven Significant Signs (12:1-14:20)

1. A woman clothed in the sun (12:1-6)
2. Satan cast out (12:7-12)
3. War between Satan, the woman and her son (12:13-17)
4. The beast from the sea (13:1-10)
5. The beast from the earth (13:11-18)
6. The Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1-5)

INTERLUDE: VISIONS OF FINAL JUDGMENT (14:6-20)

- Three angels proclaim judgment (14:6-12)
- The dead who die in the Lord (14:13)

7. The harvest of the earth (14:14-20)