
The Book of Revelation

Lenten Study 2021



Whore of Babylon, by Lucas Cranach the Elder, for Luther's New Testament, 1522

Beasts, the Whore of Babylon, and the great battle; Revelation 12:1 - 18:24

The passage from chapters 12-18 are probably the best known in terms of imagery. We see the beasts, the Whore of Babylon, the number 666, complete destruction and a great battle. The end of Babylon is greeted with great joy and triumph. However, the passages can be very uncomfortable. Beyond the glee at total annihilation, there is also the heavily sexist language around the Whore and women in general. This makes it difficult to read.

We have to remember that John's version of women was not shared completely with the wider Christian world. In fact many women were leading in worship as ministers, deacons, apostles, bishops and teachers during this period. As more Roman and Greek values influenced the church, the role of women would be curtailed, but it would never be eradicated.

Pregnant woman

Almost all of the imagery around women in Revelation is negative. The one exception is the pregnant woman in chapter 12. Many Christian readings of this text have interpreted this to mean Mary, mother of Jesus, however, it is more likely this is a reference to Eve as the mother of humanity. The twelve stars represent the twelve tribes of Israel. In Genesis Eve is tempted by a snake, but in Revelation the same kind of monster is now identified as a dragon. While the snake was temptation, the dragon is coming from the underworld, a place of evil. Another clue to this being Eve is the description of nature being her safe place for recovery after the ordeal of giving birth and having her son almost killed then rescued by God.

Birth pains were a metaphor for change. Something new was being created, something the dragon did not want to happen. God protecting the baby thus protecting the new creation.

There are some correlations to other mythologies of the day. Isis, the Egyptian goddess, was said to have birthed a son, Horus, that had to be protected from Seth. Leto, in Greek mythology, had to protect her son, Apollo, from the dragon Python. First century readers would have recognized those traditions within John's narrative as well.



The Dragon and the Beasts

The image of a dragon has long standing in ancient mythologies, and is an easy metaphor for John. Revelation 12:9 reference to the dragon is the same as the snake who confounded Eve in Genesis, thus again bring John's narrative back directly into the Hebraic tradition.

There are a number of places in Hebraic apocalyptic literature that speak of beasts such as the Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1), who was connected with dangers from the sea, and the Behemoth (Job 40:15), who was connected with dangers coming across the land. There is some suggestion that the Leviathan was an alligator, while the Behemoth was a hippopotamus. In fact some translations of Job have "hippopotamus" instead of "Behemoth".

The trio of the dragon and beasts can be juxtaposed with God, the Lamb and the elders of heaven. The identity of *ha-Satan* became incorporated with the beast, which speaks to the theology that everything from creation to destruction to renewal, is in the hands of God. None of the creatures in Revelation come from an unknown place to surprise those fighting the heavenly battle. There is a sense that God is done with trying to protect humanity from the evil incarnate that is represented in the beast and dragon, a humanity that seems to prefer them to the purity expected by God. So the ultimate battle happens after the righteous are protected. Again this speaks to John's desire for some semblance of an Essenes version of social and sexual purity.

If the first and larger beast is Rome, then the second beast is Roman bureaucracy. Participation in Roman society was considered a form of adultery in John's version of faithful vs. unfaithful, with no regard for people's livelihoods needing to come from somewhere. John's purity does not allow those basic needs to be met by the economy of the day. As attested in the opening letters, active participation in any aspect of Roman society, was to be involved with pure evil.

Mark of the Beast

The prisoners during the 20th century Holocaust were marked by the Nazis, as were the slaves of the Roman Empire. It was a quick way to show one's status in society, and anyone living around the Mediterranean would recognize these marks easily.

Heavenly War

Much like the pregnant woman, the Heavenly War brings to mind similar stories from different mythologies around the Ancient World. The battle between the Titans and the Gods in Greek mythology, and the battle between Baal and Yamm, the god of the sea and chaos, in Canaanite myth, include a lot of the same elements of God's forces fighting beasts and dragons and having ultimate victory. This imagery and these stories would have been well known throughout the Mediterranean, regardless of the beliefs of the people.

Beginning in 12:7, archangel Michael and his angel warriors easily defeat the dragon and throw it down to earth

Nero and 666

In Hebraic Gematria, 666 was the combination of Hebraic letters that added up to the phrase "*Kaiser Neron*" or "*Nero Caesar*". A myth existed in Rome, that Nero would rise from the dead and become the emperor once more. After his suicide in 68 CE, a number of men claimed to be the 'new Nero', returned from hiding and ready to retake Rome. They started rebellions that were quickly squashed.

One of the most dangerous was a man who emerged twenty years after Nero's death,

and was supported by the Parthians - the same people reputed to have supported the Israelites during the Jewish Wars (68-73 CE). A war between the two empires over the matter was narrowly avoided, but that would have been contemporaneous with John of Patmos, if we go with the later dating of Revelation, who was writing with hope about the destruction of Rome.

In Hebraic numerology, 6 is also the number of being incomplete because it comes before 7. Thus the number is an exaggeration of the beast being short of the perfect creation that the Roman Imperial cult claimed when they said the Emperor was also a god.

Over time, Nero became associated with the Anti-Christ. (The term "Antichrist" is found in the 1st and 2nd letters of John, talking about the one who denies both The Father and

Nero Caesar	
נרונקסר	
ך	= 200
ס	= 60
ק	= 100
נ	= 50
ו	= 6
ך	= 200
נ	= 50
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Sum: 666	

The Son. It isn't until the 4th century that the Antichrist starts becoming more self determined and destine to undermine not only Christ but all followers.)

Some translations of Revelation have 616 as the number of the beast. When the final 'n' was removed from the name to make it "*Kaiser Nero*" instead of Neron, gematria would add the letters to reach 616.

Seven Bowls

Following the pattern seen previously with the seven scrolls and seven trumpets, the seven bowl contain destruction that will be visited upon the earth. The first four are poured out quickly, then a pause, then the fifth and sixth bowl are continued destruction, then another opportunity for repentance. The pattern breaks at this point however. In the previous two rounds of seven, the final item brought with it renewed worship. The bowls bring with it renewed destruction of Rome and all the symbolism that Rome represented before it is destroyed.

Bowls were part of Temple worship and would have been recognized by John's office. Not only did they hold incense, they also collected the scarified meat and vegetables that would become meals for the Temple priests.

In the Talmudic times c. 500 - 800 CE, just as Rabbinic Judaism was rising, Incantation Bowls were commonly used in the household to collect evil wishes and spirits. There might be some connection between what John is referencing in the first century and what would develop as part of Jewish home worship, but those threads have not been firmly connected.

Seven Mountains and Seven Kings

Travellers to Rome would have recognized the seven mountains as those surrounding the city of Rome. The Seven kings are seven emperors, but scholars cannot agree on which seven. Depending on whether Revelation was written around 60 CE or the later 90 CE influences how many emperors would have been known to John.

Those who want to use Revelation as predictive try to align these seven kings with modern government heads, which also keeps changing depending on when and where those thinkers find themselves.

Babylon

Babylon in Revelations definitely meant Rome, the city as well as the culture. The parallels for first century Christians, if we go with a later dating of Revelation, were clear:

1. The destruction of both the first (by Babylon) and second (by Rome) temples.
2. People removed from their land and their place of worship (Babylon captivity and Great Diaspora of the Hebrew people after the destruction of the second temple)
3. Foreign governance of the land God gave them.

Babylon was a huge metaphor in the Hebraic and early Christian mindset. During their time in Babylonian captivity, the bulk of the Hebrew Scriptures were collected and written. Rome had an equally large influence on their cultural development, given they were the only conquered culture in the Roman Empire that had an agreement allowing them to continue their culture and worship rituals, and were exempt from participate in the national cult worshipping the Emperor. They were a nation within a nation. John placed the early Christian communities within that Hebraic tradition, and Babylon/Rome because the empire trying to separate the people of faith from the true God. Every experience of persecution was rolled up into this one metaphor of God's forces rushing in to finally conquer the forces of evil.

Other apocryphal literature written within the century or two before reference Rome as Babylon: 4 Ezra 3:1-2, 28-31; 2 Baruch 10:1-3, 11:1. Another reference can be found in 1 Peter 5:13.

Whore of Babylon

Also meaning "Idolatrous", and not just "adulterous", this image of a woman that is the downfall of men and all that is holy, has been a thread in Christian culture since the second century. The image John presents has historically been seen as the image of Roma, the goddess of Rome, who sits on her throne.

If the beast is meant to be the Roman Empire, the Whore is Rome itself. According to John's imagery, all national leaders spent an extraordinarily large amount of time trying to be in Rome's good graces, presumably to avoid war with the Empire. The images of prostitution suggest other nations frequently worked against their own best interests, in attempts to appease Rome. Hebrew text outlined Babylon's destruction in vivid sexual terms, so the

hoped for Roman destruction took on those images as well: Isaiah 21, 47; Jeremiah 51; Ezekiel 16:39; 23:10, 29; Nahum 3:6

Accusations of sexual sin were as common and as effective a method of destroying a person's reputation in first century Palestine and throughout history, as they are today.

Women as Symbols of Purity and Evil

This is problematic for feminist theologians and historians, especially those who choose to work within the confines of Christianity. In the strictest narratives, women are relegated to two roles - the perpetual virgin who can also be a mother, or the prostitute who is only interested in the downfall of men.

Greek philosophy had a very low view of women. Plato thought women were only of value if they were mothers of sons, and Socrates believed women were defective men. These two thinkers were the most influential in Greek society.

Hebraic thoughts about women were more generous. Women contributed to the family household through their own work and could own their own business. Additionally Hebraic tradition believed women were given a special type of wisdom and understanding (*Binah*), that was not given to men. However the Talmud and oral tradition also has places where women were seen as vain, easily corrupted, and quick to believe false prophets.

Both of these attitudes towards women became part of Christianity. Although Paul highlighted certain women who were leaders in the earliest churches (Romans 16), other scriptures talk about women needing to be controlled. Unfortunately outside of occasional woman in the Gospels, nowhere in the Christian Scriptures were women developed as well rounded characters who represent more than good or evil. Even Paul's references in Romans 16 mention only the women's names and contributions to the developing church, nothing about them as people. Nowhere in Revelation is this spelled out as clearly as in 14:3-4b, "No one could learn that song except the one hundreds forty four thousand (7:4) who have been redeemed from earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes."

The system of Patriarchy relies on the belief that men are superior to women, and both The Fall with Eve, and Revelation with the Whore of Babylon, have been seen as justification for this continued belief that all the bad of the world comes through women. Even those with no use for Christian theology have little problem accepting this part of the tradition.

Song of Celebration

The final song in Revelation 18 is reminiscent of other great songs of accomplishment in battle against an overwhelming enemy, such as Miriam singing in Exodus 15, Deborah's song in Judges 5, and much of Psalms. Again John brings the reader back to worship within the Hebraic tradition that the early church has inherited.

Those who made their living from the extravagance of Rome are left off to the side watching the destruction of the Whore of Babylon with dismay, realizing their road to wealth has been cut off. This extravagance did not fit John's version of what a faithful life should entail, again with no regard for people's livelihoods.

