

Session 5 – Chapters 12 to 17 - The Lamb, the woman and the beast(s)

Guides to understanding Revelation that have come out in the last 4 sessions.

1. For any vision, look for similar language or events in the OT that might help us interpret it.
2. When it describes an individual, sometimes they represent a whole group of people.
3. The time period illustrated by sequential visions (or within a vision) can shift back and forth.
4. The repeated themes are
 - a. Oppressive regimes will go on persecuting those who are faithful to Jesus.
 - b. God is already judging those who do so, but is limiting the scale of those judgments.
 - c. Things will get even worse for the Church to the extent that it will appear to be defeated.
 - d. But a time is coming when he will bring about a final judgment.
 - e. In doing so he will vindicate those who have remained faithful.

The woman, the child and the dragon (ch12)

The woman – appears to be the mother of Jesus. But v1 includes symbolism we've seen before. The 12 stars on her head could refer to the 12 tribes of Israel, or to the Church, or to both.

In Gen 37:9-11 Joseph dreamed of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. His father Jacob recognised the sun & moon referred to him and Rachel and the 11 stars (12 with Joseph) are the 12 tribes. The woman in Rev 12 would therefore appear to represent the descendants of Israel.

But also, the 7 churches are represented by 7 angels who are the 7 stars in the right hand of Christ in Rev 1:20. So, perhaps the woman represents the whole company of God's faithful people.

The description in v6 recalls the Israelites in the wilderness after they escaped from the Egyptians. There their faith was tested and refined, and they were protected and nourished by God (Deut 2:7). Rev 12:14 (the wings of an eagle) alludes to God's care of Israel in the desert.

The time she is in the wilderness (1260 days or 'time, times & half a time' v14) has already been used to symbolise the period from Christ's death and resurrection to his second coming, during which the Church experiences persecution, the testing and refining of its faith and God's protection.

In v17 the woman's offspring are described as those who keep God's commands and hold fast to their testimony about Jesus. That clearly refers to the faithful Church.

There may also be a reference here to what God said in Gen 3:15-16 about Eve experiencing pain in childbirth, but that her seed would one day strike the head of the serpent.

Putting all that together, it would seem that the woman represents the whole community of God's holy people from both before Christ's time on earth and after.

The child – sounds like Jesus. The reference in v5 to ruling the nations with an iron sceptre comes from a messianic psalm, Ps 2:9 and from Gen 49:8-10 (see notes on ch4 about the Lion of Judah).

The child being snatched up to God sounds like Jesus' ascension, making v5 possibly the shortest ever summary of Jesus birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection & ascension.

The dragon - v9 directly identifies it as the devil, or Satan.

Verses 4&9 may be an echo of Isa 14:12-17, but v4 is more likely to come from Dan 8:10 where the stars flung to earth are trampled on. That might suggest the stars there refer to God's holy people.

There are also many references in the OT to Pharaoh and Egypt as a sea dragon, also called Rahab (Isa 51:9; Ps 89:10; **Ezk 29:3; 32:2-3**)

There are strong links with the fourth beast in the vision in Daniel 7 (and more in Rev 13). The 7 heads may combine the heads of the first three beasts and the four heads of the fourth beast. Other aspects of the four beasts from Daniel get combined into one description in Rev 13.

War in heaven – Possibly the heavenly counterpart of earthly events in v1-6 (cf Dan 10 & 12:1). Here Jesus conducts the fight v Satan from the earth, while Michael fulfils his part in the heavenly realm.

Michael is considered the angel who represents the Jewish people (Dan 12:1 & later Jewish literature)

Satan's defeat - He loses his place in heaven.

Compare Dan 2:31-35 re a stone crushing 4 oppressive kingdoms with Lk 20:17-18 about Jesus being the stone which crushes all on whom it falls and with Gen 3:15 about striking the serpent's head.

Before Christ's death and resurrection Satan could use his position in heaven to bring accusations against God's people – of deserving punishment for sin. But once Christ had paid that penalty on their behalf no further punishment could be called for. Satan's accusations were no longer valid. His case was defeated and his position in heaven fundamentally undermined. Hence Gods' holy people have overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (Rev 12:11), i.e. by remaining faithful to Jesus throughout their life as a result of God protecting them spiritually.

Why is there still evil in the world if Satan was defeated at the cross?

Whilst Satan lost privileges in heaven, he remained a deceiver and accuser. He now sends demonic representatives throughout the world to lead them astray, blind to their spiritual security before God. (Rev 2:9,20,24; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20; 20:3,7-10; Mt 24:4-5,10-11,23-24; 2 Cor 11:12-15; Eph 4:14; 2 Pet 2:1-22; 2 John 7-11). Rev 12:9 recognises this but asserts the devil's time for doing this is curtailed.

Satan cannot take away their spiritual security, but he can harm them physically through persecution.

We now live in the 'inaugurated kingdom', the 'already and not yet'. Christ's death and resurrection inaugurated the kingdom of God such that it is already here. But the kingdom promises have not yet all been fully realised and will not be until the last judgment, when evil is finally eradicated and those who have remained faithful are vindicated. This picture is reiterated in 12:13-17.

The waters spewing out of the mouth of the dragon imply the use of words (probably of deception) with which the devil tries to overwhelm God's people. The earth swallowing the flood alludes back to the exodus and the earth swallowing the Egyptians pursuing the Israelites at the Red Sea (Ex 15:12).

The beast from the sea (13:1-10)

The leopard, the lion and the bear all come from the first three beasts in Dan 7. The ten horns come from the fourth beast and the seven heads from a combination of them all.

The horns, heads and crowns are a metaphor for powerful, evil, oppressive kingdoms (see Dan 7). This beast is probably therefore representative of all such states, powerful institutions or systems.

Note the irony of the dragon giving his power, throne and authority to the beast just as God the Father gave his power, throne and authority to Jesus when he ascended to heaven.

The fatal head wound was inflicted on Satan as a result of Christ's death and resurrection (Gen 3:15). The wound being healed explains why Satan is still organising forces for destruction. He seems like Christ to have been reborn, yet his wound will ultimately lead to his end. The image of a resuscitated beast is figurative for the repeated rise and fall of oppressive structures that owe their power to the devil (see Dan 7). The healed wound may be another means of Satan's deception (cf ch 9 & 12). He seeks the marks of deity, while not actually being divine – a definition of blasphemy.

Some interpret the beast as the emperor Nero. He died in AD 68, but some believed he was not dead and would return to rule. This identification is unlikely as Nero committed suicide as a result of losing support, rather than being killed by another. A revived Nero would not have commanded worship.

'Who is like the beast and who is able to make war with him?' is ironic use of declarations in the OT of Yahweh's incomparability (Ex 8:10; 15:11; Deut 3:24; Isa 40:18; 44:7; 46:5; Ps 35:10; 71:19; 86:8; 89:8; 113:5; Mic 7:18). In light of them, the world's worship of the beast is blasphemous, which the beast itself encourages (v5-6; see also Dan 7:8, 11-12, 19-25).

In v7 the word for *conquer/overcome* regarding the beast's impact on God's people is the Greek word (*nikao*) used to encourage them to persevere under persecution (see 2:7,11,17 etc., but also 11:7).

V8 All inhabitants of the earth (earth-dwellers) will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let them hear. If you remain faithful to Christ, if you've been sealed by God, then you will not worship the beast. Despite all the claims made about the beast, its popularity and apparent victory, Revelation reminds us Christ and those who are in him are the true victors. We will ultimately rule.

Yet (v10 cf Jer 15:2 & 43:11) you may be made captive; you may be killed by those who follow the beast. So, *this calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.*

The beast from the earth (13:11-18)

It had two horns like a lamb – another attempt at deception. Many ideas and teachings will appear to be Christian but are not, because they do not acknowledge Jesus as fully God & fully man (e.g. JW's, Mormons, Christadelphians). Or they turn his message of love and obedience into a means to control.

...but it spoke like a dragon – take note of what these groups actually say and the way they say it.

The second beast makes people worship the first beast which implies a religious role – hence being called 'the false prophet' (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The second beast seeks to turn the church community towards worship of the first beast, i.e. the state or other earthly powers – see Mt 7:15, 24:5,11. Beware of political rulers who seek to appeal to Christian voters, and of Christian leaders who take their main cues from the surrounding culture rather than from God's word.

The first beast makes them worship the dragon/Satan who is behind all means of deception & control.

It performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth (v13) - cf Elijah on Mt Carmel (1 Kgs 18) but also Pharaoh's magicians (Ex 7:20-22). Beware of being attracted by apparent signs and wonders. They are not a guarantee the miracle worker comes from God.

The image of the beast v14 - cf Dan 3 and the image set up by King Nebuchadnezzar. But think too of Roman emperors who were the focus for the imperial cult. Note Dan 3:16-18!

The mark of the beast (v16). There's been so much speculation about what it refers to. But think about what this chapter is saying. The aim is to enforce worship of the beast, and ultimately the dragon. Think of how carrying on a trade in the Roman empire required participation in rituals and sacrifices to Roman gods. What would the equivalent be today?

The mark of the beast is a parody of the seal on the foreheads of the redeemed. Both are figurative, but both represent a real sense of belonging – either to God or to the beast and dragon.

The number 666. There's been much speculation about how to understand it. Some ancient cultures used numbers to represent letters of the alphabet (gematria). Many have used that method to identify 666 as the emperor Nero. But the Greek form of Nero does not yield 666. Some argue it does if the Greek *Neron Kaisar* is transliterated into Hebrew - *nrôn qsr* (*nun*=50, *resh*=200, *waw*=6, *nun*=50, *qoph*=100, *samech*=60, *resh*=200). But this relies on a dubious spelling of *qsr* which usually has a *y* (*yodh*) after the *qoph*. Besides, it is unlikely John would rely on a knowledge of the Hebrew system of gematria among his mostly Greek-speaking readership.

Loads of names, ancient and modern, can be calculated as 666. As one commentator remarked, you cannot infer much from the fact that a key fits a lock if the lock is one in which almost any key will turn.

The majority of the numbers in Revelation are to be understood symbolically. The number 7 was used to refer to completeness and fulfilment. The most plausible meaning of 666 is that it looks close to but falls short of the perfect number 777, it is incomplete. It is not the real thing.

When John says the number calls for wisdom, it's unlikely he's saying it requires mathematical skill to interpret it. Wisdom in Biblical terms is about an appropriate response to God and about moral conduct. This is about who we worship and give our lives to.

Before jumping too quickly to conclusions about the mark of the beast, we should ask ourselves how might we be being barred from worshipping our God and forced to worship other gods? We may think that only happens in countries like China, Iran or North Korea, but it happens on a local level in many other countries that you might assume support freedom of religion. When our own culture's worship of individual rights is used to trump all other considerations, we need to be watchful.

Our calling is to not submit to laws that are intended to stop us from worshipping, but it is to submit to and endure the punishments that the state determines for not complying with the law.

A parallel to the two beasts in ch13 may be found in Job 40 & 41 - the Leviathan from the sea and the Behemoth from the earth. They are a metaphor for forces of evil. Other Jewish writings (inc Ps 74:12-14; Isa 27:1) describe how God overcame them both.

The Antichrist. No mention of name here. It comes from 1 John 2:18-19. Many see the first beast as the Antichrist because it mimics characteristics of Christ and yet attacks Christ's people. 1 John 2 says many antichrists have already come - should warn us not to seek to identify it as just one individual. The beast exercises its authority for 42 months (cf 1260 days; time, times & half a time) - probably to be taken symbolically as the time from Christ's triumphant return to heaven right up to his second coming and the final judgment. If so, the antichrist cannot be just one human individual in history.

From 1 John 2 & 4 and 2 John 7 it seems the spirit of the antichrist resides in false teaching that starts within the Christian community and denies that Jesus is from God or that he became a human being. Unlikely the beast in Rev 13 is the antichrist (or even spirit of the antichrist) since the beast's activity is focused on causing all those who do not bear the seal of God to worship him. May do so by appearing as a Christ-like figure, but no indication in Rev 13 that he arises from within the Christian community.

References in 1&2 John to an antichrist who is yet to come suggest there will be a particularly extreme expression of the spirit of the antichrist just before Christ's return.

The Lamb on Mount Zion and angelic warnings of a last judgment (14:1-13)

Ch14 starts with a fresh vision of the Lamb, the 144,000, the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders. The Lamb is standing on Mount Zion which (along with Zion) is preferred OT name for true city of God. The name Jerusalem is used when it is referred to as a place of sin and judgment. The full title 'Mount Zion' is used in passages that emphasise God's protection of the city and of those saved by him.

The 144,000, 4 living creatures and 24 elders sing a new song (v3) which no one else could learn. Another example of the protection around those who have been redeemed by Christ. Their experience of God's grace through Christ's sacrifice on the cross is something others simply cannot fathom.

The song harks back to ch4&7 and looks forward to ch15&19 and the joyful songs that praise God's victory over the enemy and anticipate the future in store for those who've come through tribulation.

those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins (v4) is not saying they were celibate, but that they did not compromise with the idolatrous ways of the world (cf 14:8). They are presented as firstfruits to God just as Jews set apart the firstfruits of their harvest as an offering to God. In contrast to the deceit of Satan, no lie is found in their mouths regarding their testimony to Jesus.

Then come three warnings of a last judgment before the final eternal judgment (6-13). As in ch11, no repentance is anticipated (v8), cf Dan 4:34-37 when Nebuchadnezzar 'glorified' Yahweh by recognising his sovereignty, but did not show any sign of giving up his Babylonian gods. The warning is justification for the final judgment (v9-11) and encouragement for the redeemed to persevere (v12).

'Babylon the Great' comes from Dan 4:30 which confirms the link with that chapter. For 'Babylon', also read Rome (and Moscow, Beijing, Washington, London, etc) – all places of idolatry and oppression of God's people will ultimately be brought down.

Babylon's riches turned the world mad in pursuit of a share in the wealth to be made in trade with it. Now that same world will be driven mad having to drink the cup of God's wrath (v10, cf Jer 25:15-16).

The eternal torment for those who bear the mark of the beast is in contrast to the temporary suffering to be endured by the faithful (v12) so they might enjoy an eternal rest (v13).

The harvesting of the earth (14:14-20)

Note the messianic language of a 'white cloud' and 'one like a son of man' (cf Dan 7:13; Mt 24:30,64; Mk 13:26, 14:62; Lk 21:27). The sharp sickle in his hand implies Jesus is coming in judgment.

It might seem odd that an angel tells Christ what to do (v15) but note the angel has come from the temple (i.e. the heavenly throne & presence of God the Father) and that Christ told his disciples only the Father knows the time the end will come (Mk 13:32). He had to wait to hear from the Father.

Clearly the grapes (v18-19) represent ungodly people. But what then is harvested by the first angel? The winepress of God's wrath mentioned only in relation to the actions of the second angel suggests the first is different and may refer to the harvest of believers. However, repetition of the same phrases for each, as well as of 'reap' (a metaphor for judgment) could suggest they describe the same thing. If John drew the picture of two sickles from the 'sickles' mentioned in Joel 4:13. The judgment of ungodly nations described in that passage suggests both sickles in Rev 14 refer to judgment of unbelievers. That the winepress is 'outside the city' also suggests judgment of those not part of the true city of God.

The 1600 stadia (14:20) is another figurative multiple (4x4x10x10) emphasising the extent and completeness of the winepress judgment.

The victory song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:2-4)

I saw (v20) introduces what some commentators see as the 7th scene or vision since the sounding of the 7th trumpet (11:15). The others are introduced at 12:1; 13:1; 13:11; 14:1; 14:6 & 14:14.

The scene is a song of victory – *'the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb'*. It therefore links to the exodus as the background to the 7 bowls (which are modelled on the exodus plagues). It was on the shore of the Red Sea that Moses sang a song of praise to God for victory over Pharaoh and his army (Ex 15:1-21). In Revelation 15 we have an example of the idea that sees the final judgment and the redemption of God's people as a new exodus.

Jewish thought also associated the sea with cosmic evil. It was the abode of the evil sea monster, Leviathan. That concept is also found in the image of the dragon arising from the sea in Rev 12. Such cosmic evil has now been overcome by God. The sea glowing with fire is a metaphor for God's judgment of the sea and the beast that comes out of it. See also Deut 32. God's people get to share in that victory, which is emphasised by them *'standing on the sea'* (better than *'standing beside'*).

The sea of glass could also refer to the vision of the splendour of God's throne we saw in 4:6. Perhaps we are meant to think of both scenes – one which speaks of victory over enemies and the other which speaks of being admitted to the presence of God. In both cases it is the Lamb who makes it possible.

The song amalgamates several OT verses, many of which have the first exodus and the development of that theme in mind (Ps 86:10; 111:2-3; Deut 32:4; Jer 10:7; Ps 86:8-10; Isa 2:2; Ps 98:2).

The seven bowls (15:5-16:21)

These are last in the repeated series of 7 judgments, but probably only in the sense they're seen last by John in his visions, not in the sense of coming after all the other judgments have already happened.

John saw in heaven the temple – *that is the tabernacle of the covenant law – and it was opened* (v5). In 11:19 John saw the temple in the 7th trumpet vision that heralds the final judgment (cf 14:15). The image of heaven opened is of the earth being exposed to the full impact of God's judgment (cf 6:14).

15:5 also mentions *the covenant law* or *the testimony* – i.e. the stones bearing the ten commandments that Moses placed in the ark (Ex 40:20). But in Revelation 'testimony' exclusively refers to testimony about or from Jesus, so 15:5 is about judgment sent upon the earth against those who reject Jesus.

Seven plagues (15:6) – only other reference comes in Lev 26:21 where the Hebrew reads *"I will add a plague onto you seven times"*. John has already relied on that OT ref in Rev 6. In Leviticus 26, God warned the Israelites of a series of judgments if they disobeyed his commandments and indulged in idolatry. The judgments would get progressively more severe if they failed to repent. Their purpose

would be to encourage repentance among true believers and yet harden the hearts of those inclined to compromise their faith in Yahweh. The Lev 26 judgments can be seen as a model for all the sets of 7 judgments in Revelation.

The golden bowls used to deliver the plagues (v7 & 16:1) hark back to the golden bowl of incense, representing the prayers of those who'd suffered for their faith, which was poured out upon the earth (8:3-5 and 5:8; 6:9-10). The bowls of wrath can be seen as the final answer to those cries.

The 7 bowls have strong similarities with the 7 trumpets. It seems reasonable to assume they describe the same judgments but from slightly different perspectives. Like the first 5 trumpets they describe plagues similar to those at the exodus. Both sets (trumpets & bowls) present the plagues as affecting, in the same order (1) the earth, (2) the sea, (3) rivers, (4) the sun, (5) the realm of the wicked by darkness, (6) the Euphrates, (7) the world (using the language associated with the final judgment of lightning, rumblings, thunder, earthquake and hail).

This suggests the 7 bowls fill out more details of what has already been described in ch6-14, rather than them being new judgments following historically after the seals and trumpets.

The 6th bowl introduces three impure spirits that look like frogs (v13), again like one of the exodus plagues. But these frogs are identified as demonic spirits coming from the dragon and the two beasts. They go out to perform signs and gather the kings of the whole world for battle on the great day of God Almighty. This battle is to be against the people of God and against God Almighty himself.

'Look, I come like a thief...' (v15) resonates with several NT verses (Mt 24:43 & Lk 12:39-40, 1 Thess 5:2-4 & 2 Pet 3:10). This is a reassuring reminder and encouragement that Jesus will return when people are not expecting him and when his Church is under great threat. The Church needs to remain awake and clothed, ready for when that moment comes. See Mt 25:1-13 and Rev 3:3-6, 22.

Armageddon (meaning 'mount of Meggido') - does not refer to a specific geographical location, though it recalls a battle site in Israel's history (Jdg 5:19 referring to events of 4:1-16; 2 Kgs 23:29 & 2 Chron 35:20-24). Armageddon became typological for the last battle against God's people and Jesus (Ezk 38:2-8; 39:2,12; Mic 4:11-12; Zeph 3:8; **Zech 12:1-11**; 14:2-4,12-14 - these all speak of it happening just outside Jerusalem in the mountains of Israel. Megiddo is on a plain many miles north of there.

The bowls come to a climax in the seventh one (v17-21) which again uses the language of *'lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, earthquake and hail'* which have occurred with the 7th seal and 7th trumpet and which figuratively describe the moment of the final judgment.

This bowl is *'poured out into the air'* (v17) which is sometimes used to describe the realm of Satan (see Eph 2:2).

Out of the temple a loud voice cries *'It is done'* which is similar to what Jesus cried as he died on the cross (Jn 19:30), except that Jesus' cry then was about the accomplishment and fulfilment of redemption, whereas the cry in Rev 16 is about the completion of judgment.

The description in ch16 escalates the scale and severity of the judgment from what we have read in 8:5 & 11:19, such that the earthquake is like none that has ever occurred since mankind was on the earth (v18) and the hailstones weigh 40kg! (v21 – 'literally 'a talent'). But still the response from those affected by the judgment is to curse God not to repent. This tribulation will be like no other, but God's people will be delivered (which is also what Daniel saw in Dan 12:1-3, cf Ex 9:13-26; Mt 24:21; Mk 13:19)