

Chapters 12 to 14 of Revelation tell a surrealistic drama, opera-like in its exaggeration of the eschatological battle between the forces of God and the force of evil. Its impact comes not from analyzing it but by hearing it read or reading it, with imagination and insight. This can be facilitated, but not replaced, by understanding something of the unit's literary context and structure, the cultural context of the mythological pictures contained in it, and by a discussion of the characters and action of the drama.

The word myth has become associated with falsity or "fake news" in our culture. Yet the word means a story that is told and retold to make sense of something else by explaining it or by giving it meaning. Today's scripture is mythical in the sense that it's aiming to explain how there continues to be evil and hardship in the world even after the definitive victory of God in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. John uses many other ancient cultural and religious myths of the Roman Empire, ancient Mesopotamia and Greek culture to do just that. If we simply read the text literally we miss those deeper literary and cultural intersectionalities, the multi-layered narrativity with which the vision is told in view of communicating a deeper vision in this radically encouraging pastoral letter intended for the churches of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) facing persecution and hardship in the Roman Empire solidifying around the practice of Emperor Worship as the main political and cultural unifying practice.

Dragon - John is exiled to prison on the island of _____. Not far from there is the island of Delos which was sacred to the Greeks for it was there that the divine Apollo was born. His mother Leto was impregnated by the King God Zeus. She fled there from the dragon Python, who wanted to kill her newborn son Apollo who would become the sun god and eventually kill Python. It's a variation of the story of how the forces of darkness, disorder and death rebel against the divine king of light, order and life. Python attempts to kill the king, or overthrow his kingship and establish the rule of darkness. It may seem ancient or not important, but it's culturally relevant in the time of John for Caesar August (the first Roman emperor) interpreted his own rule in terms of this tradition, claiming that he himself was the new Apollo bringing a new golden age. Nero, the first emperor who persecuted Christians, and who is referred to throughout Revelation, erected statues in Rome of himself as the god Apollo. And so it's probable that John is using this well-known story and literally recasting it, providing new identities for the characters, to convey a different message and vision of why the world is how it is.

The dragon is a parody of God the creator described in chapter 4:1-11 who is worshipped by all, deemed worthy, and has all authority. Throughout the prophets the enemies of Jehovah are identified with this mythical dragon (also present in Mesopotamia myths as the personification of evil). See Jeremiah 51:34 (Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is the dragon); Ezekiel 29:3-5; 32:2-8 (Pharaoh of Egypt is the dragon).

Who is like the beast: this proclamation of the beast's greatness is a parody of the one regarding God's power: in 6:7 "17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and **who is able to stand?**"

SCRIPTURES FOR

SUNDAY 5.13.2018

Revelation 13:1-18

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ And I saw a *beast rising out of the sea*, having *ten horns* and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ² And the beast that I saw was *like a leopard*, its feet were *like a bear's*, and its mouth was *like a lion's* mouth. And **the dragon** gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴ They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "**Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?**"

⁵ The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over *every tribe and people and language and nation*, ⁸ and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

⁹ **Let anyone who has an ear listen:**

¹⁰ If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

¹¹ Then I saw *another beast that rose out of the earth*; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. ¹³ **It performs great signs**, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; ¹⁵ and IT WAS ALLOWED TO GIVE BREATH TO THE IMAGE OF THE BEAST so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶ *Also it causes all*, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, *to be marked on the right hand or the forehead*; ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ **This calls for wisdom**: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What jumps out at you in this reading? Why?
- John is writing this pastoral letter to encourage, challenge and edifying Christians in Asia Minor facing the pressure to participate in Emperor Worship. What message is here for those facing such a dilemma that might entail religious, political or economic persecution?
- How do you understand the persistence of evil in the world today, even after the resurrection of Jesus? How do you find the strength to commit to living the Way of Jesus? Are you either for Jesus or against him? Or can you participate in certain systems of the world and still be for Jesus?

beast rising out of the sea– this vision resembles that of Daniel 7:1-8 “In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, I, Daniel, saw in my vision... four great beasts came up out of the sea,...The first was like a lion ...Another beast appeared,... like a bear. ...After this,... another appeared, like a leopard. ... After this I saw .. a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong... It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns... There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.” John seems to be using that story to communicate his vision of the forces of evil, resisting the Lord of all: Yahweh

Leviathan [also known as Lotan, Tiamat] – is a sea monster referenced in the Hebrew Bible in the Book of Job, Psalms, the Book of Isaiah, and the Book of Amos. Many parallels are drawn between it and the dragon and world serpent narratives in other religions. Leviathan figures in the Hebrew Bible as a metaphor for a powerful enemy, notably Babylon (Isaiah 27:1). Leviathan mythically represents the chaos, destruction, evil, everything that resists the good divine order. Here the beast seems to be a parody of God and Christ. The beast, like Christ, is killed (receives a death-blow) but overcomes death and consequently worshipped and given authority. Curiously the beast is given authority, whereas Christ gives himself to ransom others.

another beast that rose out of the earth– Behemoth (Hebrew: בְּהֵמוֹת) is a beast mentioned in Job 40:15–24. Like the Leviathan, the land beast is a close match to the Lamb, but not its equal. **It performs great signs** wonders as did the saints and wonder-working followers of Jesus did in the first century. IT WAS ALLOWED TO GIVE BREATH TO THE IMAGE OF THE BEAST – using the same words as in the greek translation of Genesis 1:27 & 2:7 in which humankind is made in the image of God and given life through the gift of God’s **pneuma** (breath or spirit). *Also it causes all.. to be marked on t the forehead*– just as those who are in Christ are sealed by God on the forehead in Revelation 7:3 [The angel said] “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we *have marked* the servants of our God with a seal on *their foreheads*.”

More Notes on the Text and other Related Texts:

This calls for wisdom- John is contrasting the beasts and God/the Lamb. Wisdom is needed to discern between them, understanding their ultimate purposes, as wisdom is needed to discern the ultimate purpose of Emperor Worship in Asia Minor.

The beasts known as **Leviathan** (from the sea) and **Behemoth** (on the earth) are encountered throughout the Bible and also in many non-canoncial Jewish-Christian Writings including:

1 Enoch 60:7-25 | Leviathan and **Behemoth** were present in the world from the beginning of creation. *The Book of Enoch (also 1 Enoch; Ge'ez: መጽሐፈ ሄኖክ mets'ihāfe hēnoki) is an ancient Jewish religious work, ascribed by tradition to Enoch, the great-grandfather of Noah. The older sections of the text are estimated to date from about 300 BC, and the latest part probably to the first century BC.*

It is not part of the biblical canon as used by Jews or most Christian denominations. The Books of Enoch are seen as having some historical or theological interest, but they generally regard the Books of Enoch as noncanonical or noninspired.

7. And on that day two monsters will be separated from one another, a female monster whose name is **Leviathan**, to dwell in the depths of the sea, above the springs of the waters. (*compare to Job 3:8*)

8. And the name of the male is **Behemoth** who occupies with his breast an immense desert named Dendayn on the east of the Garden where the chosen and the righteous dwell. Where my great-grandfather was received, who was seventh from Adam, the first man whom the Lord of Spirits made. (*compare to Job 40:15*)

2 Esdras 6:49-54 | Leviathan and **Behemoth** were present in the world from the beginning of creation. *Esdras (also called 4 Esdras, Latin Esdras, or Latin Ezra) is the name of an apocalyptic book in many English versions of the Bible. Its authorship is ascribed to Ezra*

⁴⁹“Then you kept in existence two living creatures; the one you called **Behemoth** and the name of the other **Leviathan**. ⁵⁰ And you separated one from the other, for the seventh part where the water had been gathered together could not hold them both. ⁵¹ And you gave **Behemoth** one of the parts that had been dried up on the third day, to live in it, where there are a thousand mountains; ⁵² but to **Leviathan** you gave the seventh part, the watery part; and you have kept them to be eaten by whom you wish, and when you wish.

⁵³“On the sixth day you commanded the earth to bring forth before you cattle, wild animals, and creeping things; ⁵⁴ and over these you placed Adam, as ruler over all the works that you had made; and from him we have all come, the people whom you have chosen.

2 BARUCH 29 | Leviathan and **Behemoth** will be involved in the end days – the Day of the LORD: *2 Baruch is a Jewish pseudepigraphical text thought to have been written in the late 1st century AD or early 2nd century AD, after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. It is attributed to the biblical Baruch and so is associated with the Old Testament, but not regarded as orthodox or inspired scripture by Jews or by most Christian groups.*

29:7 And YAHWEH answered and said to me: That which will happen at that time bears upon the whole earth. Therefore, all who live will notice it.

29:2 For at that time I shall only protect those found in this land at that time.

29:3 And it will happen that when all that which should come to pass in these parts has been accomplished, the Anointed One will begin to be revealed.

29:4 And **Behemoth** will reveal itself from its place, and **Leviathan** will come from the sea, the two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation and which I shall have kept until that time. And they will be nourishment for all who are left.

29:5 The earth will also yield fruits ten thousand fold. And on one vine will be one thousand branches, and one branch will produce one thousand clusters, and one cluster will produce one thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor of wine.

29:6 And those who are hungry will enjoy themselves and they will, moreover, see marvels every day.

29:7 For winds will go out in front of ME every morning to bring the fragrance of aromatic fruits and clouds at the end of the day to distill the dew of health.

29:8 And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time.

six hundred sixty-six | THE MARK OF THE BEAST - This number isn't a religious crossword puzzle to solve, but rather a symbolic metaphor to be taken seriously but not literally. A perusal of John's references to the mark of the beast (see 13:16-18; 14:9-11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) indicates that it is one expression of his 'dualism of decision.' It's a sign of ownership and security. The Lamb marked his followers with the seal of the Living god in (7:1-8; 14:1-5). The beast imitates the Lamb marking his followers with his mark. For John, there are only these two groups, these two choices – everyone bears one mark or the other. There are no anonymous Christians, no middle-of-the-road, no non-aligned. The mark of the Beast is also economic, one cannot participate in the marketplace without it. It represented something all too real to the members of John's churches who felt the economic pressure inherent in Christian commitment. Guild membership (like being part of a union or business district) often involved participating in pagan ceremonies (such as Emperor Worship). Business contracts often went to those who "patriotically" supported the Roman administration's gift of peace and prosperity. Such patriotism was expressed and sworn through participating in pagan rituals.

That the mark of the beast is a man's name is explained by the ancient practice of **gematria**, common in John's setting and time. Gematria originated as an Assyro-Babylonian-Greek system of alphanumeric code or cipher later adopted into Jewish culture that assigns numerical value to a word, name, or phrase in the belief that words or phrases with identical numerical values bear some relation to each other or bare some relation to the number itself. A single word can yield multiple values depending on the system used. This also was used by the Greeks. "Nero Caesar" in the Hebrew alphabet is קסר נרון, which when used as numbers represents 50 [Nun נ] + 200 [Reish ר] + 6 [Vav ו] + 50 [Nun נ] + 100 [Koof ק] + 60 [Samech ס] + 200 [Reish ר] = 666. Nero was the seventh Roman Emperor, but the first to persecute the Church (and Christians). He blamed them for the fire in 64 CE (*Nero probably started*) in Rome, which destroyed much of the city. Nero committed suicide on June 9, 68 CE. But it was commonly thought he would come back to further persecute the Christians and rule the Empire. John doesn't see Nero as literally resurrecting, but he does see a new persecution looming for the Church on the horizon, picturing the advent of the new Roman oppressors as the "return of Nero". His statement isn't a mystery to decode as much as a warning to those who saw commitment to Roman ideology as harmless and compatible with Christian commitment. His picture-language warns, "Beware! It's Nero all over again!"

(M. Eugene Boring, *Interpretation Commentary on Revelation*. 1989. pp.163-64.)

John seems to equate the Beasts and their Mark with the spiritual powers behind what is happening in the world. He calls for wisdom and discernment in order to truly see what is happening, who is at work, and what choice should be made as we walk by faith the Way of Jesus. His admonition is similar to that of Philippians 6:10-20 || " ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power...For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."