

FGBC: A Woman, A Dragon and A Child: Puppet Distraction

Revelation 13:1-18

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Ever wish you had more days in the week to get stuff done? Well, in 1792 the French Revolution redesigned the calendar seeking to accomplish a couple things. First, they wanted global time to acknowledge that finally the ultimate revolution had occurred. And secondly, they wanted to diminish the visible influence Christianity had on culture.

So, for a short time in France, 1792 became year 1, and the 7-day week that we get from Genesis was replaced with a 10-day week.¹ They also experimented with metric time and a few other innovative ideas. But the main hope was to get the world to know that the utopian state had finally arrived.

If this seems a little out there you should know that the calendar has actually been restarted more times than anyone knows. Aside from France in 1792 Japan still resets their imperial calendar every time a new emperor comes to power and countless kings throughout history have done the same. It's a way for a king to get his people to revolve around him. And it wasn't until 465 when a monk named Dionysius decided that the most significant monarchy of all time belonged to King Jesus and so calculated when Jesus was born and called that year 1. We now know his calculations were off by 4 years – Jesus was actually born in 4BCE, but that's a minor point.

What's a little more interesting is that Dionysius didn't choose January 1st as the beginning of the year. Nor did he choose December 25th. Instead he chose March 25th as New Years which is the traditional date that the angel Gabriel told Mary she was going to have "The Baby." As far as Dionysius was concerned, the reign of Emperor Jesus began the day of His conception. And so March 25th was New Year's Day until it was changed to January 1st in 1582. In all this Dionysius' goal was that the glory of Christ would be proclaimed every day on the lips of every person. And Revelation 13 helps us appreciate why Dionysius did what he did.²

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If you've got a Bible on your phone or you see one in the pew in front of you go ahead and open it up to Revelation chapter 13.

Last week we started a new section in Revelation which began with Jesus opening heaven to John enabling him to see into the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant sits – God's mercy seat. And from this "throne" a vision of cosmic battle appears dominated by three pictures.

First Jesus showed John a pregnant woman, clothed in the sun, standing on the moon with a crown of 12 stars on her head. And John calls her a sign; she points beyond herself to the people of God of all time.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Republican_calendar (Accessed February 20, 2020)

² Outline adapted from Darrell Johnson's "Discipleship on the Edge"

Then John saw was a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and it too is described as a sign. And John outlines that the dragon is Satan, the devil “who leads the world astray.” And he’s huge and powerful able to fling stars to the ground and he’s ravenous with the desire to consume the woman and her offspring.

And then John sees a child. Not a sign. Not pointing beyond itself. The most real reality in all the universe. The King of kings and Lord of lords. And Satan is there to consume Him at His birth, but God caused the serpent’s scheme to fail. The child escaped. This was Christmas, year 1.

And the dragon is ticked. And in his rage against Jesus, who he can’t destroy, he targets the woman and her children. And that brings us to today’s text where we find out he doesn’t do this directly. Instead he goes after those who “hold fast their testimony about Jesus” by using two allies, two puppets – and the three of them together make up an unholy trinity.

Would you stand with me for the reading of God’s word beginning in Revelation 13 verse 1. Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Revelation 13:1-18]

Alright, this passage contains probably the most infamous picture in Revelation – the reference to 666. Everyone knows this number is bad news from theologians to average church attenders to the producers of a whole string of B-grade movies. Everyone’s excited about this, and the result is there are essentially limitless interpretations.

So how can we know how to read this? Well, you start by writing off any interpretation by Quentin Tarantino or Dan Brown. But then you find something interesting. And that is that even the most conservative theologians interpret this section figuratively. And so here I think I’m on safe ground because this is the way I’ve been going all along.

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So let’s unpack these two side-kick beasts as Jesus shows them to John.

The first one, in verses 1-10 comes out of the sea and John says it gets its power from the Dragon – that’s going to be important. And it has 10 horns with crowns on each of them, and 7 heads. And one of the heads has a fatal wound that has been healed. And each head has a blasphemous name inscribed on it. This is a bad dude.

On top of this the beast from the sea has a body like a leopard with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion. Talk about a grotesque and difficult picture to hold together. I have trouble even imagining what it might even look like.

And John says the world follows this beast and worships it saying – verse 4 – “Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?”

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Now skip forward to verses 11 to 18 where we get the second beast. This one comes out of the earth. It's got two horns like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon. And its job is to make people worship the first beast, whose fatal wound has been healed. And so to this end it performs powerful signs like Elijah – fire falls from heaven when this beast is around. And people get suckered by its power – they get deceived by it. And in the end it forces people to receive the mark of the beast on their right hands or forehead – 666.

So what's going on here? Well first I want you to see how the dragon and these two puppet beasts seek to mimic God. This is Satan's counterfeit trinity.

So the dragon, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth mimic Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The dragon from chapter 12 mimics God from chapter 4. He's the head of the three. And verse 2 says he gives power and a throne and authority to the first beast like the Father does to Jesus. And The dragon has seven heads, which picture extreme authority, and they mirror the seven spirits of God from chapter 4.

Then the beast from the sea mimics Jesus, the Lamb, from chapter 5. So he becomes the main presence on earth that everyone notices. The dragon doesn't run around on earth, he lets the first beast run around on earth. And people worship the dragon, but they also worship this first beast because he has a head that seemed to have had a fatal wound – it's like he died – but then it got healed and came back. And it is given – verse 7 – "authority over every tribe, people, language and nation." Compare this to the Lamb from chapter 5 of which God's people sing:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and break its seals and open it.

For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for
God

from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation
5:9)

If that sounds familiar that's the point. Satan loves to mimic God. He wants to be God, and so he establishes his own blasphemous trinity to lead humanity astray. And the final part of the trinity is the beast from the earth who mimics the work of the Spirit.

So the Spirit is the most elusive member of the Trinity. Spirit in Hebrew is the word "breathe." And the Nicene creed tells us "He proceeds from the Father and the Son." But He doesn't get the attention the others do. His job is to get people to worship the Son, He points to Jesus. So Jesus tells us:

When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will
not speak on His own but will tell you what He has heard... He will
bring Me glory by telling you whatever He receives from Me. (John
16:13-14)

So the Holy Spirit fills Christ-followers and enables and empowers us to bring glory to God. And in chapter 11 He enables the 2 witnesses, the two lampstands, which we said were a picture of the faithful church, to testify about the glory of God. And God empowered them to do signs and wonders.

Well, here in chapter 13 this beast of the earth, with two horns makes the earth and all its inhabitants – verse 12 – “worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed.” And he too performs great signs, “even causing fire to come down from heaven.” And – verse 15 – he was given power to give *breath* to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak.

So the dragon and these two puppets are Satan’s counterfeit trinity. And they seek to lead the world astray. So how do we recognize them, and what do they do?

Let’s start with the beast of the sea which gets described in verses 1 and 2 and if you could take a peek there in the text as I continue that would be helpful.

Over the last couple weeks we’ve unpacked that most of the imagery we see in Revelation comes from the Old Testament. And here Daniel 7 is most helpful in unpacking what we are reading. So the prophet Daniel had a dream in the first year of King Belshazzar – (see how calendars worked back then, he came to power and restarted the calendar).

Anyway, in his dream Daniel sees four beasts coming up out of the sea. The first one was like a lion, the second one was like a bear, the third one was like a leopard and the fourth wasn’t like anything Daniel had ever seen before but it had 10 horns. There is an obvious parallel here to what John sees in Revelation 13.

And in Daniel the point of the dream gets unpacked and it becomes clear that the four beasts aren’t supposed to be taken literally, they are four kingdoms that God has rejected and therefore have taken on beastly characteristics.

Now a couple things to note here, in Daniel there are four beasts each pointing to a kingdom – probably Babylon, Persia, Mede and Greece. But in Revelation we get one beast coming out of the sea: part leopard, part bear, part lion with 10 horns. So it’s like all these beastly kingdoms are rolled into one. So the beast of the sea then would represent any or all human kingdoms that have rejected God and taken on beastly characteristics.

Now in John’s day that would have most obviously been Rome. Rome was very opposed to Christ and had all sorts of beastly parts to it. But it isn’t just Rome that is like this. Empire after empire have shared these characteristics. One kingdom like this dies and the next one is born.

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Does that sound like any world you are familiar with?

So the dragon goes after the children of the woman, but he doesn't do this directly, he uses the beast of the sea to do this; he uses dragon-manipulated political power to oppose the church.³

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Now political power never sets out to be beastly. But they often hail themselves the pinnacle of human achievement: think the French Revolution or Nazi Germany or our great and powerful partner to the south. Canada's not like this because we have no power. But we esteem ourselves particularly advanced in our tolerance of tolerance – don't we?

Friends, nations all set out to be their own masters, and this is blasphemous. No person or nation can be God but God alone. And it's when we refuse to acknowledge God that we set ourselves up as God, and the demonic influence shows its cards.

Now hindsight is 20-20 so it's easy to see that Rome was full of this. All sorts of divine honours were heaped on the Caesars. Temples were built in their honour. And Domitian, who was ruling in John's day, was even called *Dominus et Deus* – Lord and God.

But nobody does this today right? There are no temples being built in Trudeau's honour. Of course not – we live in the secular age where people would prefer there were no temples at all.

But here's John's or Jesus' point: "governments which step out from under the rule of God do not become divine [or more sophisticated and advanced]. They become demonic. Governments that exalt humanity as the measure of all things do not become more humane; they become more beastly."⁴

And so I wonder, do you see things in Canada that are like this? Is immorality touted as advanced thinking here? Are the unborn and the elderly and the sick being protected or compromised? Are religious freedoms being upheld or diminished? Is Canada an easy place to be an outwardly visible Jesus follower, or is it becoming increasingly difficult to do this?

In a world where the beast from the sea has exerted its influence there is always increasing pressure to compromise. It's fine to worship Jesus in private – Satan's cool with that – just don't bring your faith to work.

So much more could be said here, but let's look at the beast of the earth and his number.

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Now you've probably heard lots of people talk about what this sign might be. Is it going to be a tattoo, or is it going to be some kind of computer chip stuck under your skin? The text doesn't say, and so you can speculate all you like, but I'm not sure we have to.

³ Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, 126 in Johnson, 233.

⁴ Johnson, 234-35

So first of all we've seen how this beast mimics the Holy Spirit in that its job is to get people to worship. Worship is a religious thing. And in chapters 16, 19 and 20 John calls this beast a "false prophet." So, since the first beast has ties to the state this beastly false prophet is using false religion to lead people to worship the state.

Now this was very much the practice in Rome. City after city competed for the right to erect temples to Rome and Caesar – that's the religious world propping up the political world. But we don't do this today do we? Nobody worships the state.

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Not the same way, but I wonder, as secularism increases here and we approach the point where our charitable status starts to disappear. How many churches will capitulate to the state rather than lose their tax advantages? Or today, as Canada values tolerance, are there not churches that have jumped on board to claim culture's ideas as virtues? Beastly things are happening right here.

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Friends, there is no Christian country on earth – not Canada, certainly not the States. The dragon and his puppets run rampant here.

And so our allegiance must always be to Christ before country. As countries move away from Christ they always become beastly. And here it is friends, the deception is to get Jesus followers to compromise our worship to Christ by encouraging us to be Canadian. Do you feel that pressure?

And Canada is a great country, and I'm thankful to live here. But my worship belongs to Jesus. And so Jesus, not Canada, defines what is virtue and what is vice.

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Just one quick word on the number – 666. There have been all sorts of theories of how to unpack this. Some people have given all the letters in the alphabet values and then seen whose name adds up to 666. It turns out all sorts of names can add up. Nero was one. Domitian was another. But then actually if you are a little loose with your math (which people who have taken this interpretation usually are) then you can make all sorts of names work. And so several popes have been proposed along with Mohammed, Martin Luther, Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler, Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan who happened to live in a house in Bel Air, California with the address 666.⁵

But I think there is an easier way to get at this. Remember the parallels? We need to read this in context. In Revelation 7 Jesus followers are sealed with God's sign on their foreheads and in Revelation 22 we learn more about this sign. It says:

And they will see His face, and His name will be written on their foreheads.
(Revelation 22:4)

Now throughout scripture a person's name is their character. And so having God's name written on you is like saying you bear the image of Christ – you look like Jesus. The alternative here is – verse 17 – bearing the name of the great imposter. If 7 is the

⁵ Johnson 247.

number of perfection, and 777 is perfect perfection, then Satan is 666, the complete and perfect imperfection. And those who refuse God's rule end up imaging their father the devil. There is no alternative.

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So what do we do with this? How does this help Jesus followers in 2020? Well, I think John boils it down to one thing for us – it's an issue of worship.

The question we are always faced with is who will I worship? Who will I adore? Who will get my attention and my allegiance? All of us give these things to someone or something. The way you spend your time and money prove you are worshipping something. There is no such thing as a person who doesn't worship – we were created as worshipping beings. And so what or who do you worship? Does Jesus really have your worship?

Friends, the dragon wants to deceive you into thinking you worship Jesus while giving yourself over to compromise. Worship Jesus and worship anything else. Worship Jesus on Sunday, but live the rest of the week for your bank balance and your comfort. By all means pray before meals but make your main passion your family. Be a Christian, but be a Canadian Christian, one who respects everyone around you by keeping your beliefs private. Do you worship Jesus?

Ultimately who you worship determines your character. The dragon and his beasts seek to steal, kill and destroy. And he operates by inflicting suffering. He steps on those around him and inspires us to do the same. But there is another power, and those who bear His name on their foreheads find themselves walking His path. And He conquers by accepting suffering and laying down His life that others might live. The real emperor is the Lamb who was slain.

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Now this happened 2000 years ago. And Dionysius sought to get the world to revolve around this fact. But he didn't get the date right, and not by four years, or even four hundred years.

Verse 8 says "All inhabitants of the earth 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" or some translations say "From before the foundation of the world."

So you see Jesus didn't become Lord when he was born or even when He was conceived. Jesus was Lord before the foundation of the world, and He is Lord today. So, in spite of the dragon's thrashing and the beast's deception, choose to live your life in light of real reality. Don't be distracted by the puppets, worship the right Lord.