

Getting Started:

Ch. 12 begins a section that runs from Ch.12-14 which highlights the war with the serpent. In this structure we've entitled Ch. 12 "the war's cosmic origin" which highlights the war with the dragon flashing back to the nativity of Jesus as seen through Israel the woman. Ch.12 reveals the dragon as the woman and child's enraged foe, and a persecutor who targets God's people. So John, as it were, pulls back the curtain so the churches can see with unmistakable clarity who it is that fights against them and why and where the fight began. Ch. 12-14 comprises a theological discussion which the churches need to consider for them to remain appropriately vigilant and faithful to Jesus. According to John there's a cosmic battle that lies behind all that occurs in Revelation.

One thing should be clear to us by now, the dragon, although defeated, is a persistent determined enemy. Paul says as much in Eph. 6 regarding the armor of God. Having failed at his attempts to kill the child, the woman, or the angelic host of heaven, the dragon turns his attention to the other children of the woman. John's vision helps the seven churches establish in their minds a deeper theological framework to understand their suffering, and the larger picture of why God is bringing all things to the conclusion as he is in Revelation. As we have said previously, when Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure, he spent time with them developing a framework in which they could understand why the world in which they gave witness of Jesus reacted as it did (John 14-17). For example, in John 15:18 Jesus tells the disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you."

Here's a book chart sketch to help you see the theme, direction and content of Ch. 12-13. In the next study we will add Ch. 14's connection to this section's theme and direction.

The War with the Dragon		
Ch.12	Ch.13	Ch.14
The war's Cosmic origin	The war's earthly impact	Winning the war
V.1-6 The nativity of Jesus V.7-9 The war in heaven V.10-12 The hymn of victory V.13-17 The war expands	V.1-6 The Beast from the sea V.7-10 The church V.11-17 The Beast from the earth V.18 The church	

The Core:

The Unholy Trinity

In order for the churches to see this battle up-close and personal, they needed to understand that it wasn't limited to a bygone time, nor relegated to the precincts of the invisible realm of heaven. Added to this, the compromising and caving-in churches of Revelation probably ignored the true nature of Rome. Remember, John said the dragon was thrown out of heaven and down to the earth and there he persecuted the woman. Ch. 12's concluding statement "and the dragon went off to make war with the rest of the children who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" is important because it provides context for Ch. 13 which introduces us to

the nature of the war and the two characters who intensify the developing story. The battle takes on new dimensions now on earth and it involves these children, the church of Jesus Christ. The dragon has two cohorts (beasts) who in turn rise from the sea and the earth causing immense destruction and harm especially to the saints. These beasts have tremendous power, influence, and authority. Interestingly, the dragon along with the two beasts have sometimes been referred to theologically as the “unholy trinity”. They share a commonality with the dragon. The fact that one beast rises out of the sea (13:1) while the other rises out of the earth (13:11) is significant because the sea and the earth comprise the bulk of creation. As well, in Ch. 13 these two beasts exercise almost complete dominance over people. The beasts are crafty, arrogant, and almost indestructible. It is their role in the framework of the battle between God’s people and the dragon that is the focus of Ch. 13.

13:1-6 The Beast from the sea

In the Bible the sea is a foreboding place of danger. This is evident in the opening chapter of the Bible, Gen 1:1 – the deep, and in Matt. 8:18ff; 14:22ff. People feared the sea because of its violent reputation. Jonah also faced a violent sea. This is the place from where the first beast arises, a place of violence. The description given in V.1, 2 is meant to portray the beast’s immense political power and authority. Many scholars connect the beast with Rome. It’s the beast that arrived on the shores of Asia Minor. And driven by the dragon it wielded incredible power as it brought the region to its knees. It’s worth noting, as Craig Keener observes, that the beast is like its mentor, the dragon. One note of difference is that this beast has blasphemous names on its heads. No doubt most would not have seen Rome like this. But ch 13 is not about what people see but about what God sees.

Similarly, when Hitler came to power, many hailed him as Germany’s liberator. He enjoyed national and even clergy approval and support as he executed his plan for Germany’s ascendancy to greatness. It wasn’t until later on that many of his supporters began to see the beast in him. “Beast” is expressive because it reveals the animalistic nature of the entity being described.

Does this mean that the beast identified as Rome exhausts the application of the idea to a future time? No. Richard Bauckham notes that although the beast here in Rev. 13 finds its origin in Dan 7, the beast in Rev. 13 goes beyond Daniel’s vision. Thus, although the images here find their origin in Dan 7, it’s important to note that John gives Daniel’s vision a fresh twist to bring it into the then contemporary time of 95 AD. John is reminding the churches that the true nature of governing authority, whether OT or NT, is beastly when it refuses to bow to and acknowledge God as the ultimate ruler. The problem is that we don’t always see things as they actually are.

According to John Rome is a many headed monster with features that bring together all the worst elements of humanity in opposition to God. The lion, bear, and leopard, are all predatory animals by nature, and having added the many heads and horns, the Christians of Asia Minor can now see Rome in all its internal and multiplied horror. Many in John’s day would not have painted Rome in such an unflattering way, preferring instead to marvel at its deceptive splendor.

Remember, in 12:9 John said that Satan is the one who deceives the world. In Ch.13 we witness this deception as the first beast demonstrates its powers. Those who watched it were mesmerized by it and worshipped the dragon because of the beast, and they worshipped the beast as well. The beast also seems to have experienced a miraculous healing as one of its heads was healed though having sustained a fatal blow. Further, it uttered great persuasive and blasphemous words toward God. Clearly this beast stands in complete opposition to God. In fact history has shown that more than a couple of Roman Emperors took for themselves names that deified their positions putting them in God's place. For example, Emperor Domitian required his subjects to refer to him as "our lord and god".

In a modern context I am reminded of a time when the cult leader Jim Jones threw his Bible on the floor and stomped on it, taunting God to strike him down. Since God did not respond, it was proof to the watching crowd that Jones was powerful and could stand up to God.

13:7-10 the Church

13:7 expands the discussion and carries on the theme of 12:17 to now bring in the Christian response to all this deception and horror. For a time this beast seems like it is unstoppable and in absolute control. This does not bode well for the Christian community. According to 13:10 it will experience captivity and death. John injects two comments here that remind his readers that of his earlier concerns. The first is in V.9, "if anyone has an ear let him hear." This ought to connect readers with the earlier letters to the churches because it's a constant phrase in them. Also note the words at the end of V.10, "Here is the perseverance of the saints." This has direct connection with 1:9. The Christian's lot won't be easy. In fact it may seem brutal and futile.

13:11-17 the Beast from the Earth

As if the first beast's horrors weren't already enough for the Christian community, another beast rises. This time from the earth. It has the same beastly nature as the first but the presentation is different. Absent are the predatory markers of the first beast, and present is a horned lamb. The odd thing about this lamb is that its voice isn't lamb-like. Rather it looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. Truly a dragon in sheep's clothing. And like the first beast, this one performs great miracles and wields great power including the controlling of wealth and commerce. This lamb is an effective counterfeit. We must remember that it's a parody of the seven horned Lamb of God in Rev. 5:6.

Scholars have debated the identity of this beast which works in league with the first. Again John is providing a revealing look at the true nature of the second beast. Speculation as to identity ranges from some sort of local government authority under the direction of Rome, to local pagan priesthoods who regulated worship in pagan temples. Whatever its identity it is clear that between the two beasts, the land and people are dominated and under the beast's complete control. Craig Keener observes that unlike the beast from the sea which might represent an invading or conquering power, the beast from the earth may represent an ungodly priesthood leading people astray in worship.

13:18 the Church

Here again John provides teaching for the churches with the phrase, “Here is wisdom. Let him who understands calculate . . .” I take this as a directive to the churches much as John’s earlier phrase (V.9) which is a throwback to the letters in ch 2 & 3. Discerning believers need to make a connection between what they see on the surface and what lies beneath.

Much speculation has followed the matter of the number 666 in V.18. No one is completely sure how to precisely interpret it. Numerous solutions have been offered but none completely satisfy. It could be the numerical name of a leader, but all attempts at exact correspondence fall short. One interesting possibility is that since “7” is the Biblical number of perfection and completion, 6 falls just short of perfection. Putting 6 in a string 666 is meant to intensify and emphasize the beast’s imperfection. Those in league with the beast and receive his number are simply indicating their agreement with the beast’s incredible opposition and rebellion against God.

Much speculation has occurred with regard to the “the mark” on the bodies of those following the beast. And much of this speculation has come with very destructive results among believers causing undue worry. In fact in some cases this speculation has turned some believers into paranoid “mark hunters” who are able to find 666 on almost any product one might think of. Constance Cumby is one such individual. Years ago Cumby wrote a book on this subject in which she was able to find 666 on the Saturn rocket as well as the backing of a rug sample.

Obviously this mark is meant to stand in stark contrast to the sealed people of God in Ch.7. While much is unknown about this mark in John’s day, one thing is clear. As Craig Keener points out, Rev.13 reminds the churches that compromise is not to be part of the believer’s life. “Revelation”, he says, “allows for no divided allegiance.” On the other hand, if we become bothered about the possibility of having this mark it’s a pretty good sign, I think, that we don’t have it. The point is not to over speculate about, or dismiss too quickly as irrelevant, this mark. Rather we ought to think rather soberly about the impact this mark has on people and live accordingly as people sealed by God, having his mark on our forehead.

Whatever this number signifies, believers had a duty to think it through and not be fooled.

Making it real:

Ch 13 provides the discerning believer with several nuggets of practical application for life.

1. Believers are in a continual spiritual battle with the evil one. There is a war going on, even though it may not be visible to the human eye. Paul was absolutely clear on this in Eph 6. This is why the spiritual armor he talked about is necessary and we need to be wearing it. This calls on believers to live with greater spiritual perception and clarity and not be fooled by it.
2. The dragon’s battle plan is generally not a full frontal assault, but to find secondary means of influence to fight his wars. Governments are often good candidates. They generally work for the good of those they serve, but on occasion they can become repressive and brutal in their treatment of their subjects. When a brutal government does reveal itself it is usually only after

innocent lives have been taken and families and nations decimated. Here is a good reason and motivation to pray for kings and those who occupy places of power in government (1 Tim 2:1-3).

3. The dragon's plan is to discourage believers by waging continual war. It has been reported that in 1996, 160,000 Christians lost their lives as a result of persecution. Imagine a world in which believers face significant restrictions to their freedom or ability to work or even live over long periods of time. When God "blesses" us with good things, we cannot get enough. When he allows us to suffer, we accuse him of abandoning us. The churches of Revelation needed to know that they were in a spiritual war that was a marathon, not a sprint.

4. Christians will not always recognize the war they are in. At least 5 of the 7 churches were on the verge of some kind of compromise or caving in to Rome. Outwardly Rome may not have seemed like that beastly a regime to deal with. It was only when John pulled back the mask that God revealed the true nature of what the churches were facing. Sin looks much uglier and brutal than how it sometimes reveals itself. Ch 13 paints a stark picture to wake the churches up!