

Dragon Tales

Revelation 13:1-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Today is the third Sunday of our five-part 2019 Faith Questions series—a sermon series where your questions set the agenda.

Today's question is another very specific one and another one that I would never have chosen.

What does the beast with ten horns and a lot of faces in the book of Revelation mean?

I have a confession to make right at the outset. I have never liked the book of Revelation.

I like a few parts—chapter one where Jesus is described as the Alpha and the Omega, the one who was and is and is to come; chapters 21-22 which use beautiful and evocative language to set our imaginations soaring about the new creation that is promised.

But all the stuff in between? All the scrolls and lampstands and warnings and violent images of swords and riders and blood and dragons and strange looking beasts? I have found these parts weird and bewildering. At best.

I am by disposition an incurable rationalist. I read and think in very linear, logical ways (or so I am pleased to imagine). I like language to be precise, descriptive, and thorough.

I don't care for ancient forms of writing that rely heavily on archaic symbolism and mythical images and cryptic numerical codes.

I take comfort that I'm not the only one who find Revelation baffling. Martin Luther would have gladly expunged the book of Revelation from the bible (along with a few books, including James).

And even further back in the third century, Dionysus, Bishop of Alexandria had this to say about how Revelation was viewed in his time:

Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by

chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity.

Sounds about right.

On the other end of the spectrum, some people *love* the book of Revelation seeing it as something like a divine road map for the end times.

People have used it to try to work out the precise chronologies of when Jesus will return and usher in Armageddon; they have tried to link figures in the book with political rulers from Napoleon to Stalin to George Bush.

Every year, I get something like the following flyer in my mailbox advertising a conference at a local hotel.

A spectacular multimedia seminar unlocking the mysterious symbols of bible prophecy!

Sounds exciting.

The book of Revelation is among the most misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused books in the bible.

I say this often, but I can't stress it enough. The bible is not a flat book where each part communicates in exactly the same way for exactly the same reason. The bible is a collection of diverse writings written across thousands of years and in multiple genres, each written in a particular context for a particular reason.

Yes, the bible tells a single story about the movement of God from creation to new creation. But it does so in a way that sometimes seems strange to our modern ears. Or, at least it *should* seem strange, if we're paying attention.

When we read books like Revelation, we should think of it almost like entering a foreign country or learning a new language. It asks us to inhabit a very different thought universe than the one we are familiar with, one that assumes all kinds of reference points from the broader culture that we may not be familiar with.

We should approach texts like Revelation with a great deal of humility and with a recognition that there is probably a lot going on that isn't obvious to us from our remote cultural vantage point.

At the very least, we should resist the temptation to read it like we would read a modern history textbook or scientific manual. That's not how texts worked back then, and we must not impose

our modern assumptions and expectations upon them.

The same Dionysius I quoted from the third century earlier went on to say this:

But I could not venture to reject the book, as many brethren hold it in high esteem... I suppose that it is beyond my comprehension, and that there is a certain concealed and more wonderful meaning in every part. For if I do not understand I suspect that a deeper sense lies beneath the words. I do not measure and judge them by my own reason, but leaving the more to faith regard them as too high for me to grasp. And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it.”

I think that’s a good place for us to start.

So, what can we say about Revelation?

Well, the first thing is that Revelation is a *letter* written to churches. It’s a very strange letter, with all kinds of interesting symbols and imagery, but it’s still a letter.

And he is writing in the form of apocalyptic. This is a strange genre to our ears, but it would not have been as strange to John’s audience. They would have been familiar with books like Daniel which also takes this form in parts.

They would have known how to interpret this genre.

We who aren’t as familiar with this way of communicating need to do a bit more work to figure out what’s going on.

Some have compared the way imagery functioned in apocalyptic literature to the way political cartoons function in our day.

Here’s a few examples that I took out of a commentary written by one of my former professors at Regent College.

1. **Elephant with a noose.** If I said, “And then I saw an elephant whose trunk had taken shape of a noose...” you wouldn’t have a clue what I was talking about. But if I were to tell you that this image came from the days when former US president Bill Clinton was under the threat of impeachment? The elephant then becomes more easily interpreted as a symbol of the Republican party who were thought by some to be attempting to “hang” Clinton.
2. **City on the verge of being swallowed by a dragon.** If I said, “Behold, I saw a great city in the mouth of a fire-breathing dragon” you would probably be kind of lost. But if you knew that this cartoon appeared on July 1, 1997, the day that Hong Kong reverted to communist China from British rule, you might understand the image.

That's sort of how apocalyptic imagery functions. It's not a perfect analogy, but I think it helps.

So, how does our passage this morning fit into this broader picture? What are we to make of this image of a dragon and a beast with ten horns and seven heads and leopards and bears and lions who makes war on the saints and utter blasphemies?

Well, the first thing to say which should be obvious by now is that it is not a literal description of a beast that will one day literally appear on the earth. I doubt many of us would interpret it that way, but it needs to be said.

These are, rather, symbols. The dragon is thought to be Satan, the accuser, the enemy of God.

The beast likely represents the empire of Rome that was "making war" on the saints, behaving in beastly ways that ran counter to God's kingdom of peace.

Like all empires, Rome was ruled and maintained by violence. Like all empires, Rome came to be idolatrous.

The images of leopards and bears and lions likely refer to the book of Daniel who likely used these images to symbolize the empires of Babylon, Persia, and Greece who conquered the Jewish people at various points. The horns and the heads likely symbolize various rulers from the Seleucid dynasty.

Perhaps the beast that John saw in Revelation 13 is a kind of "composite" beast, symbolizing all of the empires that have marched and will march across history's stage.

The specifics are interesting, perhaps. Or not.

But I don't think we should get too hung up on them. History provides us with so many examples of people doing this—trying to identify this or that present or historical figure with this or that specific symbol, usually in order to map out the end times. These all end in failure and futility.

It's important to note that the big picture of the Revelation to John here.

The beast symbolizes earthly power, authority, violence, and idolatry. It portrays the dark forces at work in the world that are threatened by the kingdom of God, by Jesus Christ, and by his church and who seek to suppress it.

It is an heavily symbolic description of the early church' experience as a tiny, persecuted minority and of the empires who threatened it.

This is, I think, how we should read passages like Revelation 13.

But of course, we don't just read Revelation to come to deeper understandings of diverse genres of biblical literature or to gain an understanding of the early church's experience, useful and as important as these things are.

We read believing that even strange books and passages like this have a word to speak to us, two thousand years later, who seek to follow Jesus in very different circumstances.

I think there are at least two ways in which Revelation 13 speaks to our time and place.

A Call to Faithfulness/Allegiance

Our passage this morning ends ominously:

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 (Rev. 13:10).

John is writing from a prison cell on the island of Patmos to a group of churches that are suffering persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian.

The persecution is not yet at the level that it would reach in the second century—the church is still pretty small, and the emperors were usually preoccupied with other more important matters.

But Domitian demanded, as other emperors would to varying degrees, that everyone in the empire worship him as “Lord.”

For the growing Christian church, this was a problem. If Jesus is Lord, the emperor, obviously, is not.

John is writing to the churches to encourage them to stay strong, to not give in, despite whatever persecutions might come from their refusal to bow down to the emperor.

John is urging the early church to refuse to bow the knee to a beastly empire, to proclaim “Jesus is Lord” even at the cost of their own lives. He was urging them to be faithful in their primary allegiance to the kingdom of God, and to Christ their king.

John knew that beastly empires are seductive. Power, violence, and idolatry always are.

This is no different in our day.

Can we hear Revelation 13's call to allegiance to Christ above all else?

Our situation is not as dire as the church John was writing to. But we, too, face questions about where our allegiance fundamentally lies.

One example. As we know, political season is ramping up. 2019 will be the year where we go to the polls both provincially and nationally.

People have strong opinions about this. When I think back to what many of my Christian friends posted on social media last election time, I remember thinking that politics seemed to have usurped theology in many people's minds.

Far too frequently, during election seasons it seems to me that many Christians—conservative, liberal, and points in between—expect the kingdom of God to be legislated into existence by their preferred political party.

Revelation tells us that this is folly.

Our prayer and action as Christ's church ought not to be, "We need to make Canada Christian again" but "Help us to take our place among the faithful witnesses who refused to bow down to lesser kings. Help us to be the church, instead of a vaguely religious political interest group. Help us to show, in word and deed, that we believe what Jesus told us: that we are a city on a hill, that we are salt and light."

Revelation 13 reminds us that as *Christians*, our allegiance is *always* to another king and another kingdom.

A Word of Comfort

Again, I'm going to speculate a bit about what's going on behind this week's question. I suspect that there was a bit of fear or anxiety about the end times. All of those images of dragons and beasts sounds kind of scary if taken at face value.

And many of us wonder: Can God be trusted with the future? Will the beastly things that threaten his church win out after all? Will the beastly things that threaten *me* win out in the end?

Things don't always look good for the church. They didn't look good in the first century either.

Things don't always look promising in our own lives. There is much that threatens human

flourishing.

It can be easy to lose heart, to imagine that the scary things that face us will eventually overwhelm us.

I've told this story in a sermon before but it's too good not to share it again. Also, it was almost eight years ago, so you probably don't remember it. ☺ It comes from the commentary on Revelation from my professor at Regent:

The story is told of a group of seminary students and a janitor. The students were, for a season, playing basketball in a nearby high school gym. While they played, the janitor, who had graciously allowed the seminarians to use the gym after hours, would borrow one of their Bibles and spend the hour reading it.

One day, one of the young men asked the janitor, "What have you been reading in the Bible?" "Revelation," he replied. The seminarian chuckled, "Yeah, right." "No, really," said the janitor. Having heard one of his professors say that no one really understands the strange book, the seminarian asked, "Do you understand what you have been reading?" "Oh, yes," replied the now smiling janitor.

Chuckling again, the seminarian asked, almost sarcastically, "Well then, tell me what it means." The janitor looked to his right and then to his left, leaned into the seminarian's ear and whispered, "It means that Jesus is gonna win.

Jesus is gonna win. That's the big picture.

All that frightens and threatens us, all that is dehumanizing and greedy and idolatrous, all that seeks to stamp out faith, hope, and love will one day finally bend the knee to Jesus Christ, the risen and exalted one, the head of the church, the Lamb who conquers the dragon with his word.

This is good news. And good news is a good place to end.

I pray that we would be challenged anew to examine our allegiances. To proclaim, with confidence and conviction, that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

I pray that we would be comforted by the sure hope that Jesus really is gonna win.

Amen.

