

THE DRAGON'S DEMISE: EXPERIENCING APOCALYPSE

Jesse W. Baker on the
Relevance of Revelation

My childhood did not include encountering dragons much that I can recall. I knew there were fanciful stories about them in the world, but those stories were never collected on my bookshelf. Nor did I come across dragons on any of my childlike adventures. I never had treasure which could have been stolen from me as happened to the dwarves in *The Hobbit*, so I never needed to organize a party to rescue said treasure. I was never magically swept away into a picture and involuntarily set sail as was Eustace Clarence Scrubb in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and so never found a dragon protecting its prized possessions. This was very fortunate for someone like me since, as I stated, like Eustace, I never read the right books. I might have accidentally been transformed into a dragon, oblivious to the dangers associated with a dragon's hoard as I was. Thankfully, I never had to face those threats.

My encounter with dragons of this sort did not come until later in life; and, while I have since read many of the books with dragons in them — I am now much better prepared if I am ever whisked away on an other-

worldly journey — it is one dragon that mainly captured my attention: the dragon from The Revelation of St. John. In his letter, John suggests to his readers that no one needs to be whisked away from their present situation to face a dragon; rather, they face it on a daily basis. While Revelation 21 and 22 leave little doubt that there will be a day when God returns and all evil and death and dragons are dealt with finally and for all, there will be a time when the dragon roams around and does damage. John writes to prepare his readers for that encounter.

Some context might be helpful. Revelation was a letter written to a group of Christians of a particular time, who lived in particular places, and were experiencing particular problems. However one might read, interpret, and seek to apply to messages of this strange text, one cannot do so apart from first situating the letter in its first century context. John claims to be writing “The revelation of Jesus Christ.”¹ The Greek word translated as “revelation” is *apokalypsis*, “which suggests that it discloses things that would not be otherwise known.”² The world then, as now, is not always easy to understand. The world often operates in ways that challenge the claims followers of Jesus make (that is, Jesus as Messiah is the world’s true ruler and king), which may, in turn, lead followers of Jesus to struggle with maintaining faith. The goal of John’s revelation, then, is to show things as they really are, and to show who is really in power. Therefore, throughout

¹ Revelation 1:1 (NRSV).

² Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 46.

the letter John depicts Christ Jesus as the ultimate victor and all people in Jesus as equally victorious, even if their victories are achieved through death. John writes to encourage his readers to maintain their faith, since faithfulness is the thing his audience needs most to endure this chaotic world.

Anyone who has read Revelation, however, knows that John is less than straightforward with his message. This letter is filled with images and pictures that may, especially for modern readers, suggest that the last thing John wants for his readers is understanding. Making that assumption would be a mistake. The images are, at times, obscure, but the style is an invitation for the reader to engage in a process of meditation and discernment. When the reader engages pictures John uses and the language he employs, John invites his readers to see the world differently. The strange images in Revelation, far from complicating the world, are trying to expose it for what it really is, namely, a place full of brokenness, a place that is under false leadership, a place that tries at every turn to distract Christians from faithfulness in Messiah Jesus. In fact, while John would not have known this terminology, Revelation is essentially a first century version of what we would now call an imaginative apologetic. The goal is to invite readers into a story, to see how God has worked in the past, is working in the present, and will work in the future.³ The believer, seeing this full picture can know how they fit in God's

³ The past, present, and future dimensions of God's work and being are poetically described in the simple phrase repeated throughout the letter, "who is and who was and who is to come" (Revelation 1:8, NRSV).

overarching narrative. Michael Gorman says it this way: “Apocalyptic literature enables such hope and resistance by revealing the truth about unseen realities, such as God, heaven, and hell, and about unknown future realities, such as judgment and salvation.”⁴ In other words, Revelation pulls back the curtain on this world so that readers can see that deeper truth. As we will discover, this is not a message just for John’s past audience; it is a message for Christians across time.

Spanning the Ages

John was certainly a student of Scripture, and his letter is steeped in the thought and images used to describe the world from its very beginning. These images, in turn, become the means by which John’s readers of all ages can diagnose the temptations of their particular age. Standing behind the images in Revelation is a whole history of conversation revolving around how God’s people might remain faithful to him. The images John uses are rooted in Genesis where, for example, we see a serpent tempting humans to diverge from the path God asked them to walk, and scenes like the one where Cain was warned to resist sin which was, in serpent-like fashion, crouching at the door, whispering in his ear that he could get what he wanted if only God’s voice was rejected. God, of course, tried to lay down guardrails that would keep his people from straying, including prayers to be regularly repeated so that all situations might be judged in light of the relationship God wanted with his people. One such prayer was the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6:

⁴ Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 15.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.⁵

Words alone were apparently not strong enough to serve as reminders, so the bodies and homes of the people of Israel were marked as tokens signifying the relationship God desired with a faithful people. All Scripture stresses this very point, and John's letter is no exception.

The dragon in Revelation 12 and 13 functions as a threat to that faithfulness. John connects the dragon with "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" from Genesis 3.⁶ Most of the dragon's work in Revelation 12 is an attempt, not simply to snuff out faithfulness, but to snuff out the faithful! It begins with an open assault on heaven itself, and once cast from that height, the dragon pursues the faithful of the earth (people of faith are portrayed using the image of a woman).⁷ When this

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NRSV).

⁶ Revelation 12:9

⁷ N.T. Wright calls the woman "the faithful people of God." See more of the conversation in N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 109.

specific attempt fails, the dragon regroups for an attack on the people of God in another form.

In the last verse of chapter 12 and all of chapter 13, we see the dragon deciding on a different tactic, namely, outsourcing his work. Two beasts are called forth, one from the sea and another from the land. In the immediate context, these beasts each point to a specific problem facing John's original readers, namely, the Roman Empire. There are two significant reasons for this conclusion. First, borrowing images from Daniel 7, the first beast is described in terms of an empire. In Daniel 7:1-8, Daniel speaks of multiple empires, each beastly in their own right, and therefore described with animal-like characteristics. The first one mentioned is a lion with wings, the second a bear, the third a leopard with wings, and the last is an unknown animal but certainly no less ferocious than the previous ones. John uses these images and tweaks them a bit. The beast the dragon calls from the sea is a super-beast, as this one empire has nearly all the characteristics of the multiple empires found in Daniel 7. John writes, "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."⁸ This empire will be the vehicle to impose the dragon's will on the world.

But it is not just any empire; rather, it is one John's readers would recognize. The second beast, again, enforces the dragon's will. He speaks like the dragon, exercises its authority, and forces worship of the first

⁸ Revelation 13:2 (NRSV).

beast on the dragon's behalf.⁹ Lest we wonder who this beast is, John helps his readers by giving its name. But, in the style in which John writes, he doesn't just come out and say it. Again, he draws the reader in to do some of the work. Commentators at this point often note an ancient practice called gematria, where letters of the alphabet also had numeric value.¹⁰ It is not surprising, then, that John would ask his readers to "calculate the number of the beast" since its name and number point to the same person.¹¹ ¹² Many scholars give as a likely rendering of the numeric value the name *Nerōn Kaiser*.¹³ While Revelation was likely written toward the tail end of the first century, and Nero himself was long gone, Nero did have a reputation in his day of being particularly cruel to followers of Jesus. Most likely, John was not using Nero in a literal fashion, but as a type or category for any leader of this dragonish empire. As Eugene Boring imagines, it may be that the people would have said of this beast, "Beware, it's Nero all over again."¹⁴ To our main point here, however, this was all

⁹ Revelation 13:11-12.

¹⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 132.

¹¹ Revelation 13:18.

¹² Revelation 13:17.

¹³ For example, Koester, *Revelation*, 133.

¹⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 164. The full quotation is worth sharing: "John sees a new persecution looming on the horizon, and pictures the advent of the new Roman oppressors as 'the return of Nero.' He did not intend this in any literal sense; he wanted to make a statement to those who saw commitment to Roman ideology as harmless and quite compatible with Christian commitment. His picture-language warns, 'Beware, it is Nero all over again,' just as one

connected with the time and place John's readers lived. The dragon, the source of evil revealed early in the Bible, has worked destructively throughout history, and is now scheming against God's people in first century Rome, using the empire and its emperor to do his work.

The battle, as John describes it, is one of allegiance. To have any chance of engaging in society, the beast asks for complete loyalty; and, the mark of the beast is the symbol used for that allegiance.¹⁵ Recalling Deuteronomy and the role of the Shema, a faithful follower of God is marked with his or her faith. One not only recites words but has those words attached to their bodies (hands and foreheads are specifically mentioned in Deuteronomy 6:8). The beast asks the same thing: adherents must also be marked as a sign of honor to him (again on hand or forehead). These badges of allegiance are opposites and a person can only be marked with one. Thus, the whole of Revelation deals with this very question: To whom will John's readers be faithful? Stating it from a different angle, Richard Bauckham says that Revelation, along with all other Jewish apocalyptic writings share one question: "[W]ho is Lord over the world?"¹⁶ To be sure, that is not just a question for John's immediate audience but one that believers today must still answer.

might say of a new dictatorial anti-Semitism that many might see as innocuous, 'Beware, it's Hitler all over again.' The whole passage calls responsible interpreters of the Bible not to 'decoding' a 'puzzle' but to alertness in discerning the nature and consequences of one's commitments."

¹⁵ John says, "no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark" in Revelation 13:7 (NRSV).

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8.

Victory Is Certain

Revelation, even though it uses some fantastic language, does not actually read like a modern fantasy novel. The moment of ultimate victory, for example, is not placed at the end with a slow and suspenseful buildup to its denouement as we might expect. The moment of victory is actually described in chapter 5, the moment Jesus as the Lamb is revealed to the heavenly throng. This Lamb was victorious for its own death and its ascent to power. Heaven, therefore, sings a song praising the Lamb,

for you were slaughtered and by your
blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language
and people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom
and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.¹⁷

The Lamb's death results both in the rescue of people all over the world and the call to participate in the Lamb's own rule and reign. Again, this is not a mystery hidden and only to be revealed at the very end. Every victory of the faithful and every judgment of the wicked throughout Revelation flows from this central claim in chapter 5. Even if symbolic and imaginative language is used, John is clearly saying to his audience that believers across time have true and ultimate victory in Jesus' death and resurrection.

¹⁷ Revelation 5:9-10 (NRSV).

Readers are also not surprised, then, when in chapter 14 the victorious Lamb shows up again. With him are the 144,000 mentioned earlier in Revelation 7, also proclaimed victorious because of their enduring faith even in the face of death. Those who follow the dragon's beasts from chapter 13 will be judged accordingly, while those who maintain faith in God will be given victory. John's overall message of encouragement is stated clearly:

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints,
those who keep the commandments of God
and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.¹⁸

The Ongoing Test

Revelation deals with realities. The world is broken. The world is overrun by evil forces, human and non-human. These evil forces try to bend the will of humans to their control. They present themselves as if there is no alternative. From John's standpoint, however, there is one reality that trumps all others: the person and work of Jesus the Lamb. It was through his death that victory was achieved. Though it is hardly anyone's first choice, John writes so that his readers know that death while maintaining faith is a better option than faithlessness and rejection of the world's true king.

I do not think John was blind to the possibility that his age was the only one which might face the dragon and his outsourced beasts. John (mostly in chapters 15-19) conveys that the destructive power known to John's readers as Rome will meet its end. God will deal with that beastly empire in a way that is just and complete,

¹⁸ Revelation 14:12 (NRSV).

he tells them, leaving only the faithful to stand in the rubble. Near the end of the book, however, in Revelation 20 we discover a strange turn of events. The dragon is bound, but the reader is told that it will later be released again. Why is this the case? More than likely, it was a way of saying that Rome was not the last time the dragon would rear its ugly head(s) and seek to destroy God's people.

John conveys two ideas in chapter 20. First, whenever evil of this kind shows up, the faithful can know who is behind it. As Craig Koester says, "The passage offers a pointed commentary on the human condition by indicating that whenever Satan is active, some will indeed be responsive to him. Any kingdom short of the new creation, with its new heaven and new earth, will include those who have a propensity to evil."¹⁹ People will follow evil, as the allure of aligning with such power is, for some, too great to resist. The faithful, however, should not be among them. John gives us the second reason to explain why remaining faithful is the right option. When evil of that magnitude does resurface, it will also be dealt with. John gives several chapters to Rome's destruction (Revelation 15-18), but this new evil in Revelation 20 gets four verses (20:7-10). It is an imaginative way of showing that no evil really stands a chance against God.²⁰ No evil is really a threat to God's victory. Though no one knows how

¹⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 185.

²⁰ It should be noted that the much longer description of the fall of Rome in Revelation 15-18 is not because the two entities are equally matched and it takes time for God to expose a weakness and bring the Empire down. Moreover, it is a way of conveying that the judgment will be complete and thorough.

long, each failed attempt at victory by the dragon will be met with an experienced truth: “The citadel of the saints proves impregnable (20:9).”²¹ This is the case while we await the new heavens and new earth and will remain eternally the case once our Lord returns with his new world in hand.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning, Revelation serves as what we would call an imaginative apologetic for the Christian faith. For the believer, it is assurance that the way to experience life and blessing is staying true to Jesus the Lamb, as he is the possessor of victory. Our own earthly deaths, even by the hand of beastly empires, is not a separation from victory, but a means of achieving it. For the unbeliever, it serves as an invitation to join a truer story than one the empires of this world often claim. Life can only be found in God, a claim which the Bible shows to be the case from Genesis 1 all the way through Revelation 21 and 22. To borrow language from C.S. Lewis’s “Meditation in a Toolshed,” then, Revelation isn’t simply a book we are meant to look at (though, naturally, that is quite important).²² It is also a book we are meant to look along, treating Revelation more as a set of lenses through which one might view the world and God’s past, present, and future work in it.

The dragon is one character in that unfolding story. He has been a menace since the beginning and will be a source of frustration and pain until our Lord’s return.

²¹ Bauckham, *Theology*, 107.

²² See C.S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed” in *God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 212-215.

The dragon was introduced in cosmic terms and shown to work in worldly ways. The story of Revelation spans human history and projects forward into eternity. Humans are invited to participate in an abundant life which God sought to establish with the first “Let there be.” As has been stated several times before, victory — and thus God’s abundant life — was won through Jesus the Lamb. But God, through John, invites readers of Revelation to learn that our role in his eternal story and our role of overcoming the dragon and his destructive forces, is achieved paradoxically through a simple thing like faith. That remains the case until Jesus returns.

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