

SCENE 4 : Forces for evil and forces for good.

1. The dragon

¹³So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

¹⁴But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.

¹⁵Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood.

¹⁶But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

¹⁷Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

¹⁸The the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore.

The kind of energy that sought to destroy Christ wants to destroy the church (the ‘woman’, see 12:2). The church is still journeying, and so finds itself in a desert. God, however, gives to the disciples of Jesus the power to rise above the temptations of evil and to come to him. Once again John uses an animal image, the eagle, to signify the incomprehensible nature of God’s protective activity. The imagery is from the Old Testament:

I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself.

– Exodus 19:4

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

– Isaiah 40:31

The expression ‘a time, and times, and half a time’ is from the book of Daniel:

The saints shall be given into his power for a time, two times, and half a time.¹

– Daniel 7:25; 12:7

The dragon (compare 12:3) has been thrown down to earth (see 12:9). It is deceptive, taking on the subtle and tempting form of a serpent.² Water seems to be just what is needed to transform the desert. However the temptations faced by the churches of Asia Minor to accommodate with the Roman Empire are intended to sweep the church away. This ruse is bound to fail.

Having failed to deceive, evil shows itself in its real colours, no longer as the serpent but as the dragon. It stands in readiness for conflict with the church. Fittingly the dragon stands on the sand of the sea, for it comes from chaos to destroy God’s creation (see 4:6):

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.

– Genesis 3:15

¹A variation on the three-and-a-half of Apocalypse 11:9, the 42 months of 11:2 and the 1260 days of 12:6. All symbolic for a period of trial. ²Some rabbis interpreted the serpent of the book of Genesis (2:1) as a manifestation of the devil, though in the original story the serpent functions only as an animal character.

2. The beast from the sea

The beast rising out of the sea is interpreted later (see 17:7-14) as the Roman Empire, which dominated the Mediterranean. The beast incarnates the dragon: that is to say, the Roman Empire is, in John's eyes, an historical realisation of the power of evil.

John's imagery comes from the description given in the Book of Daniel of the empires which subjugated Judah, reaching their climax in that of the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes:

Four great beasts came up out of the sea ... The first was like a lion ... the second like a bear ... another like a leopard ... another had ten horns ... another horn appeared ... with a mouth speaking arrogantly ... This horn made war with the saints and was prevailing over them.

– Daniel 7:3-8, 21

John recognises that the problem facing the Christian communities of Asia is basically the same as that which faced the Jewish community at the time of Antiochus. The Book of Daniel was written to encourage the people to keep putting their trust in God and not be seduced by the apparent benefits being offered by the Greek world.

At the time John is writing, some thought that the Emperor Domitian was a reincarnation of Nero.¹ John seems to be alluding to this with his picture of the mortal wound that has been healed.

¹See the Sibylline Oracles 5.137-154. We find a similar idea in the Gospels where Herod is portrayed as imagining that Jesus was John the Baptist returning to plague him: Matthew 14:2.

¹And I saw a beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.

²And 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.

³One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed.

^{3b}In amazement the whole earth followed the beast.

⁴They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'

⁵The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.

⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

⁷Also 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,¹

⁸and 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.

⁹Let anyone who has an ear, listen:

¹⁰If 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.

The leaders of the cities that have fallen under the Roman yoke are vying with each other to win favour and benefit from Roman patronage. In doing so, says John, they are worshipping Satan. Such is the power of Rome that people are saying that no one can fight against it. As we have seen, even some of the Christian community are tempted to compromise their faith and go along with this way of thinking.

The question: Who is like the beast? is a play on the name Michael (12:7) which means, in Hebrew, 'Who is like God?'¹ Those who are imposing the Roman system are exercising enormous power, but it is essentially limited. Forty-two months is three-and-a-half years, symbolic for a time of trial (compare 11:2; 11:9; 12:6).

The arrogance and blasphemy uttered by the dragon is also modelled on Daniel:

The king shall act as he pleases. He shall exalt himself and consider himself greater than any god, and shall speak horrendous things against the God of gods. He shall prosper until the period of wrath is completed, for what is determined shall be done.

– Daniel 11:36

The followers of Jesus seem powerless against the forces of evil, as everyone around them is hurrying to curry favour with the empire. John reminds his fellow Christians that their names are written in the book of life² and their faithfulness to the crucified and risen Christ is not forgotten by God.

The exhortation 'Let anyone who has an ear, listen' is one with which we are familiar from the earlier letters (see 2:7) and from the words of Jesus. Like Jesus, they will be victims of oppression. Whatever happens, they must not oppose evil with evil.

The final statement summarises the essential message of the Apocalypse: John is writing to encourage his fellow Christians to endure through persecution and to maintain their faith.

¹Compare Exodus 15:11; Psalm 89:8.

²For the book of life, see 3:5; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27.

3. The beast from the land

The beast which rose out of the earth has two horns symbolising power (5:6).¹ It has the appearance of a lamb (claiming to be a follower of Jesus) but it is espousing the cause of Satan, in trying to persuade others to follow the way of life exemplified by the Emperor Domitian, the reincarnation of Nero (see 13:3).

The great signs by which the beast strives to claim authority are reminiscent of the prophet Elijah.² John is referring to a false prophet. In fact John decodes the symbol in this way in a later chapter:

And the beast [= the beast from the sea] was captured, and with it the false prophet [= the beast from the land] who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image.

– Apocalypse 19:20

This beast is a symbolic depiction of the false apostles who have already featured in the letters to the churches.³

Those who refuse to worship the emperor and his image are being handed over to be killed. Those who follow the Roman way are slaves of Rome, in their way of living ('marked on the right arm'), or in their way of thinking ('marked on the forehead').⁴

¹ See Daniel 8:3 for a description of a ram with two horns..

² 1 Kings 18:38. Compare Deuteronomy 13:2-4; Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10.

³ See 2:2; 2:6; 2:15; 2:20; 2:24.

⁴ This expression will recur in 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4.

¹¹Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon.

¹²It 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.

¹³It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all;

¹⁴and 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 *came back to life*;

¹⁵and 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.

¹⁶Also 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

17so 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.

18This 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.

Economic welfare depends on accepting the terms dictated by Rome.

The enigmatic 666 with which John concludes this passage has given rise to much speculation. One suggestion is that 666 refers to the emperor Domitian, the 're-incarnation' of Nero ('the moral wound that has healed', 13:3,12). Hebrew letters have a standard numerical equivalence, and the title Neron Caesar in Hebrew does in fact add up to 666.¹ Such an interpretation fits well with the thrust of the passage.

A second suggestion appears at first sight to be far-fetched. It is, however, typical of the way in which the Rabbis enjoyed playing with numbers. According to this suggestion the number 666 is linked with the Hebrew word for truth: *'emet* which has a numerical equivalent of 441², numbers which when added come to 9. Because of its special mathematical qualities and its link with the word 'truth', 9 was considered the divine number. The link comes about because 6+6+6 = 18, numbers which when added also come to 9. Perhaps John is saying that the beast has the divine number, meaning that however ferocious it may appear, in the ultimate analysis, it is under God and so cannot prevail against God or destroy God's kingdom.

A generation later, Irenaeus, who was born in Asia Minor, and so can be expected to have been familiar with the milieu in which the Apocalypse was written, warned against wild guessing in attempts to interpret this enigmatic symbol.³

The three-fold repetition of the number 6, which is half 12, and one short of 7, may simply be meant to symbolise the summit of godlessness and evil for all times.

John insists that his readers need to interpret the symbol with wisdom (see 5:12; 17:9). Each generation has to use similar wisdom to discern false prophecy and false propaganda in its own world.

¹ Neron (N=50; R=200; O=6; N=50) Caesar (Q=100; S=60; R=200).

² The first consonant, aleph, has a numerical value of 1. The middle consonant, mem, has a numerical value of 40. The final consonant, tau, has a numerical value of 400. Together they add up to 441.

³ *Adversus Haereses* V, 30.

4. The Lamb and those with him

Prior to the final conflict between the forces of evil and the forces of good, and prior to the announcing of the hour of God's judgment (14:7), we are taken to Jerusalem, the city of God, to see the crucified and risen Christ (the Lamb, 5:6) and with him the Church, already victorious.

The 144,000 (7:4) symbolises the universal or catholic dimension of the church (7:4), comprising all those who have the crucified and exalted Jesus (the Lamb) as their lord. They are 'slaves' of Christ and his Father, having 'his Father's name written on their foreheads'.¹

The imagery recalls that of the prophet Joel, who spoke of those who had escaped from the 'great and terrible day of the Lord', and were to be found gathered on 'Mount Zion'.²

That the church is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises is a common theme in the writings of the New Testament. Earlier John wrote:

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven.

– Apocalypse 3:12

We find the same theme in the Letter to the Hebrews:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood.

– Hebrews 12:22-24

¹See 7:3; 9:4. This is in contrast to 13:16.

²Joel 2:32. See also Obadiah verse 17; Isaiah 4:5; 2 Kings 19:30-31.

Then I looked, and there was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion!

and with him one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

²And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps,

³and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.

No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth.

⁴It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb,

⁵and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

The singing John hears is from heaven (3:12; 10:8), indicating that while the scene refers to the situation on earth, its significance is known only because of divine enlightenment. The song gives expression to the creative power of God ('many waters', 1:15), but the message is beyond the prophet's comprehension ('thunder, 4:5). It is a new song (5:9) celebrating a new redeeming action of God (5:9). The throne recalls God's action bringing about his will in history (1:4). The living creatures recall the many mysterious ways in which God acts in our lives (4:6). The elders recall the leaders of the people of God in the Old and the New Covenants (4:4).

The faithful disciples of Jesus are called virgins because their first love has been for him, and they have not abandoned him for another god by involving themselves in emperor cult. We recall Paul's words:

I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

– 2Corinthians 11:2

They are spoken of as first fruits, for they hold out the promise of a vast harvest of all those who in the course of history will join the ranks of the redeemed.

INTERLUDE : Dramatic Preview

1. Good will be victorious

This divine communication comes from a herald who is in the highest point of the heavens. It is, therefore, of the highest importance (compare 8:13). This is accentuated by the fact that the words ‘eternal’ and ‘gospel’ occur only here in the Apocalypse. The good news is communicated to the whole world (compare 5:9, 7:9), and its significance transcends all place and time. The summons is to all to worship the true God, the creator (compare 4:11).

The fall of Babylon became in Jewish literature the symbol for the fall of all those who oppose God and his chosen people (18:2-3).¹ In the situation in which John is writing, the force opposing God’s people is the Roman Empire. This is the first of seven statements concerning God’s judgment of Rome, and of those who have been seduced by the allurements of wealth and power into opposing God.² The imagery is borrowed from Jeremiah:

Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and is shattered; wail for her!

– Jeremiah 51:7-8

‘Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth - to every nation and tribe and language and people.

‘He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.’

‘Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of her fornication’.

¹See Isaiah 21:9; Jeremiah 51:7; Daniel 4:27.

²See 14:8; 16:17-21; 17:16; 18:1-3; 18:4-8; 18:9-20; 18:21-24.

⁹Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, 'Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands,

¹⁰they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

¹¹And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name'.

¹²Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.

¹³And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord'.

'Yes', says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them'.

The beast is the beast from the sea (13:1ff), the Roman maritime power. Its image is that of the Emperor, used for cult worship (13:14). Those who worship the Emperor are slaves to all he stands for. By their way of thinking they show that they bear his mark on their foreheads. By the way of acting, they show that they bear his mark on their hands (13:16).

The subject of the anger of God has already been discussed.¹ With this judgment, the time for repentance is over. All that awaits those who remain obstinate in evil is to suffer the consequences of their choices. The imagery of fire and sulphur² recalls the literature on Sodom and Gomorrah.³ It symbolises a total destruction which makes all life and all regeneration impossible.⁴ The situation in which the perpetrators of evil find themselves is in stark contrast to the state of the blessed who live 'in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb'.

John repeats the theme of his whole work: 'Herein is the endurance of the saints'(see 13:10). They are to 'keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus'(compare 12:17).

John is instructed to set down in writing what is the second of seven beatitudes.⁵ Writing emphasises the sureness and lasting value of what is being said (compare 1:11). John is encouraging his readers to stand firm as they face the final test. The Christian assembly to whom the book is addressed, moved by the Spirit, affirms by way of response that the faithful ones are indeed blessed.

¹See commentary on 6:16-17. For the 'cup of anger', see Isaiah 51:17, 22; Psalm 75:8.

²The imagery recurs in 19:20; 20:10; 21:8; 24:14-15.

³Genesis 19:24. Concerning the devastation of Edom, Isaiah writes: 'Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste'(Isaiah 34:10).

⁴Compare Ezekiel 38:22 and Psalm 11:6.

⁵Apocalypse 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14.

2. The execution of judgment

John invites the assembly to contemplate what he has come to see (1:7,12). Penetrating beyond the surface of space and time (hence the ‘cloud’, 1:7), he sees Christ in glory (hence ‘white’, 1:14), exercising the power of judgment (hence the ‘Son of Man’, 1:13, ‘seated’, 4:2). He is victorious (hence the ‘crown’, 2:10) with a victory that comes from God (hence ‘golden’, 1:12). The sharp sickle is in his hand, for his judgment is clear and imminent.

The first judgment, carried out by Christ himself, is of the just. He is answering the martyrs’ prayers which rise from the altar in the temple (6:9; 8:3-5; 15:5-8).

Then comes the judgment of those who have remained unrepentant. They are collected from the city (Babylon, 14:8 = Rome, 16:9) and taken outside where they have to endure the consequences of their behaviour (‘fire’, 8:5). The number 1600 (14:20) = (4x10) x (4x10). Since 4 symbolises the fullness of earthly reality (4:6), and 10 symbolises limitation despite appearances to the contrary (2:10), John may be underlining the comprehensive but essentially limited nature of evil, even in its final effects.

The blood of the martyrs is being avenged. The imagery recalls Joel and Isaiah:

Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great.

– Joel 3:13

Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the winepress? ...

I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes.

– Isaiah 63:2-3

¹⁴Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand!

¹⁵Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, ‘Use your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe’.

¹⁶So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

¹⁷Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle.

¹⁸Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, ‘Use your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for the grapes are ripe’.

¹⁹So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God.¹

²⁰And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for *one thousand six hundred stadia*.

¹On the anger of God, see 6:16-17.