



The Dragon and his Associates in the Book of Revelation

Myth and Mythology (HPHP4006)

The Great Red Dragon
William Blake (1803-5)



The Book of Revelation



- ‘Apocalypse’: visions from above that reveal the heavenly mysteries.
- Set within the framework of a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor.
- A period of crisis:
 - persecution by Domitian (81-96 CE)
 - rejection of Graeco-Roman life and culture
 - split with local Jewish synagogue

Interpreting the Book of Revelation



- Visions not intended as accurate predictions of the violent end of the world.
- 'This is the revelation (*apokalypsis*) that was given by Jesus Christ' (1:1) - a revelation of heavenly/divine mysteries.
- Appeal to the imagination and the senses.



Images of Evil

‘Revelation evidences a subversive narrative strategy that characterizes political power beyond the text as a Satanic, demonic, and empty rule that can harm the addressees but not overcome them. By constructing a reality that portrays the narrative characters in a conflict between good and evil... the Book of Revelation develops a system of values and invites readers to understand themselves anew, according to the model presented in the text’ (Michael Labahn).



Revelation 12:1-6: The Dragon's Conflict with the Woman Clothed with the Sun

1. A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.
2. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.
3. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.
4. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.
5. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;
6. and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

The Dragon's Conflict with the Woman



- The red dragon is demonic and powerful (cf. 12:3-4).
- The woman gives birth to a male child (messianic figure).
- God snatches the child to heaven for his enthronement.
- Woman remains in danger, flees to the desert. She is saved by the earth.

‘The Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Son’, William Blake, 1805.

Mother, Child, and Monster of Chaos

- Common motif in the ancient world: a divine mother whose child is threatened by a monster or serpent.
- **Egypt:** Isis and her son Horus threatened by Seth-Typhon.
- **Greece:** The goddess Leto and her son Apollo (the sun god) threatened by the dragon Python.
- Mother flies through the air.
- The opponent seeks to prevent the child from gaining authority.
- Mother and child escape through divine intervention.



First-Century Interpretations of the Myth

- **Book of Revelation:** combination of images from the Jewish Scriptures and ancient myths about the birth of gods and divine battles with monsters of chaos.
- **Roman context:** The mother figure 'becomes' the goddess Roma.
- Her son is Apollo > the Roman Empire (note that Nero is often depicted wearing a radiate crown on his coins - sun god).



Conflict with the Satanic Trinity

- A. Satan is thrown down from heaven (ch. 13)
- B. The two beasts conquer (ch. 13)
- C. The harlot rides the beast (ch. 13)
- B. The two beasts are conquered (ch. 19)
- A. Satan thrown from earth into the abyss (ch. 20)
- Divine trinity - God, Jesus, Spirit (1:4-5)
- Demonic triad - the devil/dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the land

Revelation 12:7-12: Michael and the Dragon

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back; but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - and his angels were thrown down with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. Rejoice then, heavens, and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!’

Michael and the Dragon

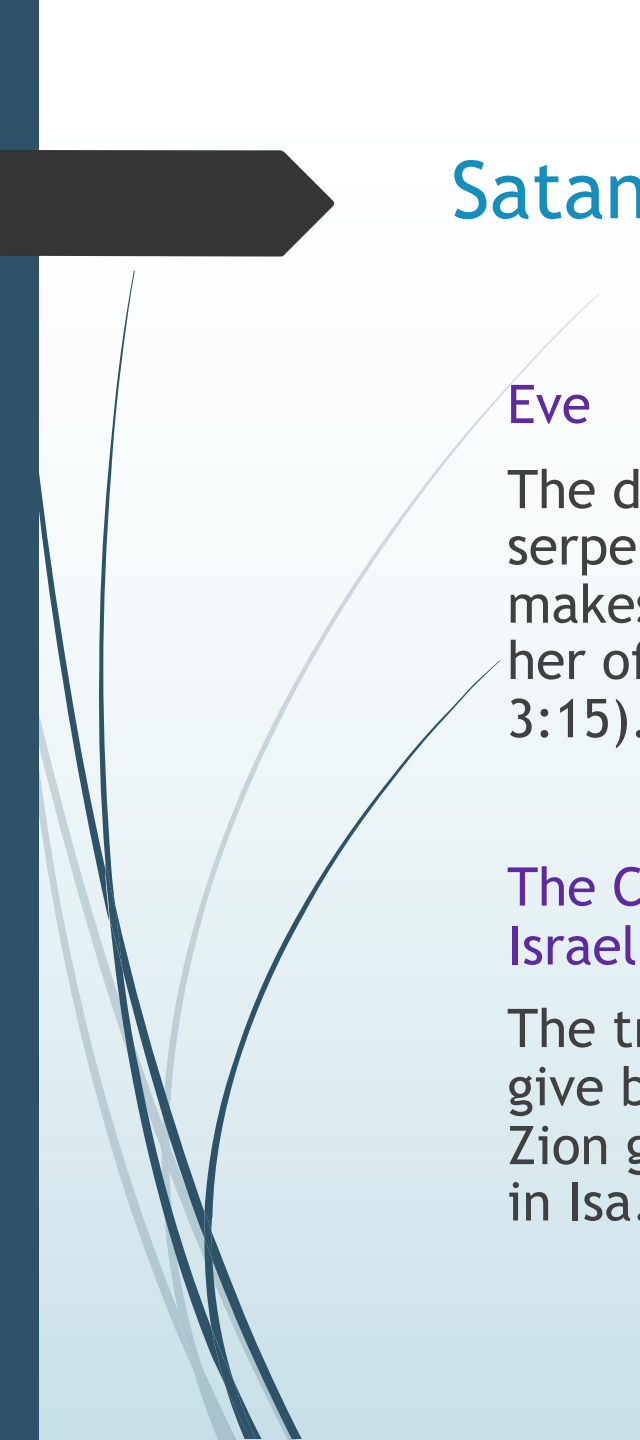


- Christ's enthronement (after his resurrection) is the catalyst for a cosmic battle.
- Michael is the angelic prince, the guardian angel of Israel (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1).
- The dragon is now explicitly identified as Satan and the Devil.
- Satan is banished from heaven; his operations are now restricted to the earth.
- His power is greatly reduced.
- Christ's blood effectively conquers the Devil (12:11).



Revelation 12:13-17

¹³. So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴. But 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 a half time. ¹⁵. Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶. But 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. ¹⁷. Then 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. ¹⁸. Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. ^{13.1} And I saw a beast rising out of the sea...



Satan and the Mother of all Believers

Eve

The dragon is ‘the ancient serpent’ (12:9; cf. Gen. 3) and makes war with the rest of her offspring (12:17; cf. Gen. 3:15).

The Church in Continuity with Israel

The true people of Israel, who give birth to the Messiah (cf. Zion giving birth to the nation in Isa. 66:7-13).

Note Exodus imagery: experiences in the wilderness, threat of flood, eagles’ wings (cf. Exod. 19:4); desert as sanctuary.

Testament of Asher 7:3: God will save Israel when he ‘crushes the dragon’s head in the water’.



The Two Beasts

- The cosmic battle continues on earth through the two beasts. Satan stands on the shore (12:18).
- **Beast from the sea**
 - represents imperial power (see chapters 13, 17) - **Leviathan**
- **Beast from the land** (13:11) or false prophet (16:13; 19:20) - **Behemoth**
 - represents the propaganda machine for the imperial cult, promoting and enforcing the worship of the beast.

Revelation 13:1-4

Apocalypse of Angers, 1373-87



¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ² 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. ³ One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴ They 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?'

The Beast from the Sea in Revelation 13

- Influence of the four beasts (Daniel 7:2-8) and the image of Leviathan, the seven-headed serpent (Isa. 27:1).
- The beast represents the power of the Roman Empire and is the incarnation of evil. Its authority is derived from the dragon (13:2).
- The beast has seven heads. Who is the head with the mortal wound that has been healed (13:3), later identified with the beast itself (13:12)?



Influence of the Nero Legend?

- Nero was a murderer, even a matricide.
- Responsible for the mass persecution of Christians in 64 CE.
- Immense suffering of Christians caused by Nero (see Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44).
- He was highly respected in the eastern provinces of the Empire, especially among the Parthians.



The Nero Legend



- Nero committed suicide in 68 CE, but rumours grew that he had not died but fled to Parthia (*Nero redivivus*): 'The reports with regard to his death had been varied, and therefore many people imagined and believed that he was still alive' (Tacitus, *Histories* 2:8).
- Revelation: Nero will rise from the dead (*Nero redivivus*) - mortal wound that has been healed (13:3-4) and wounded 'by a sword' (13:14).



The Blasphemies of the Beast

- Nero is depicted as an Antichrist figure, claiming to be God (see Rev. 13:1, 5: 'is given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words').
- Roman emperors applied to themselves numerous titles and designations: god, saviour, lord (see Tacitus, *Annals*, 14:15). Nero claimed to be a divine being (Mithras, Apollo).

The Number of the Beast

➡ NERÔN QAISAR

$$N = 50 \quad R = 200 \quad \hat{O} = 6 \quad N = 50 \quad Q = 100 \quad S = 60 \quad R = 200 \quad = 666$$

➡ THÊRION

$$TH = 400 \quad R = 200 \quad I = 10 \quad O = 6 \quad N = 50 \quad = 666$$

The Beast and the Harlot

The beast destroys the harlot: Nero returns to seek vengeance on the city that rejected him.





The Final Defeat of Satan

- Satan is bound for one thousand years (20:1-3)
- Compare with the binding of Mastema in the Book of Jubilees (48:15, 18).
- The dragon has already lost much of his power.
- He escapes from prison but is then thrown into a lake of fire and brimstone.