

Revelation 12 Study/Teaching Notes

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In teaching Revelation, our goal, with John, is to open up unseen reality. We want people to see - to see the big picture, to see what John sees, and to catch the meaning and impact of what we see with him. It's less about cognitive processing of propositional truth, and more about being captivated by the vision. Understanding symbols and imagery will help us grasp the meaning of the vision(s), but we don't want to get bogged down in details. We need to zoom out to see the big picture, where all the images and elements combine to tell the story and make their impression, where unseen reality counters the propaganda of Rome (then and now) and calls us to follow the victorious slain Lamb and live in light of the New Jerusalem.

We will have taught Revelation 12 well if our group can find ourselves in the story, if our perspective shifts to see our present reality through the lens of this cosmic battle and empowers us to respond with faith and courage and patient endurance as faithful witnesses who "keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus" in the midst of opposition, suffering, and pressure to compromise.

In studying/teaching, remember:

- Apocalyptic literature
- Images and symbols; layering/combination → meaning (like political cartoon)
- OT imagery, references, and literary forms will help interpret.
- Not chronological. What John sees next is not necessarily what happens next.
- Monster & hero myth common in ancient cultures (and appropriation of Apollo by Roman emperors)

Context of this scene in Revelation:

This is the theological center of the book.

Chapters 12-14, at the center of the book, identify the enemies of God's people (the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet), providing context for the situation of chapters 1-11, and foundation for the rest of the book, in which God will bring judgment on his enemies and ultimately reunite heaven and earth and dwell with his faithful people.

Immediate context:

11:15 "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

11:17-18 "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time has come for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants... and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

11:19 John sees God's Temple in heaven opened, and the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies.

And then these signs appear...

Handout: Revelation 12:1-17 in Context

Possible outline for group study:

- Stories of good and evil in your culture? What do they have in common? (discuss in small groups)
- Many ancient cultures, including Egyptian and Greek, had myth of hero growing up to slay a monster that had threatened him at birth
 - story of Apollo's birth and subsequent slaying of dragon Python
 - Caesar Augustus portrayed himself as the new Apollo. Nero made statues to himself as Apollo, son of God
- Genre: what's different between how you watch a documentary and how you watch anime? What we're about to engage with is more like anime.
- Frame with some context (see above).
- Listen to story, trying to imagine yourself one of John's original audience - what strikes you?
- Individual work with text, with focused observation:
 - Who? What? When? Where? - characters, setting, plot movement
- Come back together and share observations about
 - Characters - identify and describe
 - Woman
 - Dragon
 - Child
 - God
 - Michael & angels
 - Dragon's angels
 - Nations/world
 - Earth (personified)
 - Rest of woman's offspring
 - Discussion around characters:
 - unpack imagery/symbolism of woman & dragon (see below)
 - action/motivation/experience of woman, dragon, offspring

- Setting (time/place)
 - How do heaven and earth relate?
 - How does time function? (& questions raised in text around time)
 - Note: "then" = "and"/*kai* (v. 3, 7, 10, 15, 17)
 - 1260 days = 3 ½ years (time, times, and ½ time)
 - Dragon knows time short (v. 12); child will rule (v. 5)
 - Entire scene flashback
- Action/scenes/plot movement → sections/paragraphs? Title each
 - Key action:
 - Giving birth in situation of extreme vulnerability & danger
 - Rescue of child
 - Flight of woman
 - War fought, dragon thrown down
 - Declaration from heaven
 - Chase scene with miraculous escape
 - Attack on other offspring
 - Overarching observations of plot movement:
 - Pattern of pursuit and deliverance (baby, woman, rest of offspring)
 - Relentless enemy
 - Dragon always *seems* invincible threat, but thwarted at every turn
 - Sections (see also comments on structure at end):
 - 1-6 woman & dragon in heaven; threat & deliverance
 - 7-9 war in heaven; dragon/Satan thrown down
 - 10-12 victory poem (interpreting story)
 - 13-17 war on earth; enemy continues pursuit
 - 13-16 woman & dragon on earth
 - 17 war against offspring
- Read again
- Discussion:
 - How would this feel/speak to the churches to whom Revelation is written?
 - How does it speak to us? Where do we find ourselves in this story?
- Unpack the poem (victory song in center of story, breaking up narrative, between tellings of wilderness protection) – work in small groups first?, then large group
 - In Greek tragedy/drama, poetry/song interprets action, tells audience how they're supposed to think/feel

- In Hebrew literature, victory in battle followed by victory hymn (e.g., Red Sea defeat of Pharaoh's armies → song of Moses & Miriam)
- Now: salvation, power, kingdom, authority of God/Messiah
 - Because Satan has been hurled down
 - They triumphed over him...
 - Now: Satan on earth, furious, knows time short
- 12:11 = center of poem, of chapter 12, of Revelation
- How do offspring wage war? How is victory achieved?
- What does the poem tell us about how to live in the tension?
- Implications/application:
 - How does this help us see our world? How we live in midst of?
 - What experience(s) does it give us perspective on?
 - How is your community experiencing fury? Protection?
 - Perspective offered here helps us know what to resist/fight, and how to do so as followers of slain Lamb (not as our culture might encourage); gives courage and motivation to resist and do our part in the battle
 - What does it look like to be faithful? How do we persevere unto victory?
 - Our God has an enemy. How does keeping that in focus impact discipleship, community, and/or mission?
 - The story ends with a cliffhanger (offspring being pursued/attacked); but v. 11 interprets outcome.
 - The war continues, even though the victory has been won. We participate in and live from that victory, even in midst of war zone.
 - Next in Rev: dragon calls up and empowers beasts. We see how evil works itself out among humanity - and how we must live as faithful witness(es) in the midst of the war (and Babylon, the pawn of the unholy trinity)
 - Power of "the word of their testimony" - we participate in and join the true & faithful witness. How do our lives (word & deed) give testimony about the blood of the Lamb?
 - When Jesus shows up again in Rev, fights with sword of his mouth. His testimony as the faithful witness is what is ultimately victorious, in battle that doesn't need to be fought (which is also told 2x, paralleling narration of ch. 12)
 - How are we tempted to "love our lives" and "shrink from death"? What are we afraid of? What do we avoid? Especially in relation to the word of our testimony and following the slain Lamb? How can we choose Kingdom risk instead of self-protection?

- How do ways that we are deceived or accused hinder us from being faithful witnesses?
- How can we stand against the enemy by the word of our testimony?
- What difference does it make that we live from the victory rather than toward it?
- Beautiful picture of contextualization of gospel message, against the narrative/gospel of Rome the church is in danger of compromising with. Great theology/missiology! What might it look like to resist syncretism *and* contextualize the gospel in your context?

Images in text to (potentially) unpack:

Note: What follows is simply observation/background work to help you work interpretively with the text. It will not be possible to thoroughly unpack all these images in any study, nor would you want too much time or energy expended in doing so. But the more thoroughly you understand the imagery and symbolism at work, the better you will be able to discern what to share, and which questions and topics that arise to sit with.

- 12.1-2 “woman clothed with the sun...” – Ps 104.2; Is 7.14
 - Symbolic woman representing Israel/Church/people of God – Gen. 37.9-10; Is. 26.16-18, 66.7
 - Righteous Israel was portrayed as the mother of the restored future remnant of Israel – Is 54.1, 66.7-10; Mic 4.10, 5.3
 - Scholars argue that she represents any/all of Eve, Mary, Israel, the Church
- 12.3 “enormous red dragon with seven heads...” – mythological multi-headed sea serpent, associated with chaos and destruction. See Ps 74.13-14, 89.9-10; Is 27.1; Ezek 29.3, 32.2ff; Job 40.18 (Rahab, Leviathan, Behemoth – often metaphors for Israel’s enemies) – chaos monster
 - Red – color of death/slaughter (Rev 6.4; 5.5-6, 9-10)
 - horns symbolize strength (10 – Dan 7.7)
 - crowns symbolize authority
- 12.4 stars swept/flung – both Jews and Greeks used stars battling in heaven as an image for cosmic warfare; stars have already been used in Revelation to represent angels. See Judges 5.20; Dan 8.10, 12.3
- 12.5 birth of male ruler – in imperial theology, Augustus fulfilled the hope of a divine boy who would bring deliverance, unity, peace to the world
- 12.5 “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter” – Ps 2.9, messianic psalm, also quoted in Rev 2.27 and 19.15
- 12.6, 14 taken care of in the wilderness –

- Reminiscent of Israel in Exodus, a liminal time of testing/trial and miraculous provision and protection from God along journey to fulfillment of promise in reaching promised land
 - Wilderness = place of intimate fellowship and provision - Ex 16.4ff; Hos 2.14(-23); 1 Kings 17.2-6, 19.3-9
- 12.6, 14 "taken care of for 1260 days" = "a time, times, and half a time" (3 ½ years) = 42 months (½ of 7 years) - a symbolic period of time
 - A limited time of oppression. See Dan 7.25, 12.7
 - Corresponds to duration of persecution (Rev 11.2, 13.5)
- 12.7 Michael - guardian angel of Israel (See Dan 10.13, 21; 12.1; Jude 9)
- 12.7-9 war in heaven; dragon hurled down
 - Jewish thought: Satan was an angel, attempted to achieve equality with God, cast out of heaven w/ angels who followed him (2 Enoch 29.4-5)
 - Babylonian story of expulsion of Ishtar (goddess of the morning star) parallels Jewish tradition about Satan (Is 14.12)
 - Reading as pre-historic expulsion comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*
- 12.9 dragon = ancient serpent = devil = Satan ("Accuser"). References Gen 3.1-4, 14-15, identifying with serpent who deceived Eve and would one day be crushed by her seed
- 12.10 "the accuser" - In Job, Satan is portrayed as having access to God's throne where he functions as a prosecuting attorney bringing accusations against God's people. See Job 1.6-12, 2.1-7
 - Rabbinic and NT writings portray Satan as prosecuting attorney in court of heaven, while Michael functions as defense attorney
- 12.11 "blood of the Lamb" - source of victory (Rev 1.5; 5.9-10).
- 12.11 "word of their testimony" (Rev 6.9; 11.3,7)
- 12.11 "did not love not their lives so much as to shrink from death" - language of valor in battle. See Judges 5.18.
- 12.13-17 allusions to Exodus
 - Pursuit into wilderness (Ex 14)
 - "wings of a great eagle" references how God "carried you on eagles' wings" (Ex 19.4; Dt 32.10-11); Is 40.31
 - River from dragon's mouth may refer to drowning of boys (Ex 1.22)
 - Earth swallowing flood - Ex 15.12 (interpreting Ex 14)
 - earth swallowed Korah (Num 16.28-33; Deut 11.6; Ps 106.17)
- 12.15 Floods are a typical image of overwhelming evil, or of judgment and tribulation. (Ps 18.4, 32.6, 69.15; Is 43.2; Jer 47.2)
- 12.17 - See John 15.18-21; Acts 9.4-5

Structure of chapter 12:

Throughout the book, considering John's structure helps us understand his meaning. Especially where he tells his story non-sequentially, structure informs interpretation.

Though this story can certainly be broken down further, at its simplest, it is structured:

- 1-9 signs & war in heaven
 - 10-12 victory song
- 13-17 war on earth (expanding on v. 6)

Looking at it in more detail:

- 1-6 woman and dragon - signs in heaven, confrontation in heaven
 - 7-9 war in heaven & result
 - 10-12 victory song - declaring how dragon defeated
 - 12 result of war (repeated)
- 13-17 woman and dragon re-presented - confrontation on earth

Or:

- 1-6 woman and dragon in heaven: threatened birth & deliverance
- 7-9 war in heaven: dragon/Satan thrown down
 - 10-12 victory poem (interpreting story)
- 13-16 woman and dragon on earth: enemy continues pursuit
- 17 war on earth: against offspring

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