

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 30, Rev. 12-13

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What I want to do in the last session is look at another New Testament text as an example of how to utilize and apply different interpretive methods that we've talked about throughout this course. And once again, I won't necessarily explicitly refer to the method and say, now I'm doing this, but hopefully, you'll be able to identify what method is used and how I utilize it as I work through a text. And the text I want to focus on is Revelation chapters 12 and 13.

And I want to begin by reading just chapter 12. I think especially a text like Revelation is important to read. In fact, the book begins by issuing a blessing to the one who reads and those who hear.

So Revelation was first meant to be heard, and there's something about listening to the images roll before our eyes and listening to the drama that goes on. So I will only read chapter 12 and then just summarize chapter 13. So Revelation chapter 12.

And then it goes on to say, And there was a war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But the dragon was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.

The great dragon was hurled down, the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to earth and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, Now have come the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of God, and the authority of his Christ.

For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony. They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Therefore rejoice, you heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you. He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.

When the dragon saw he had been hurled down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times, and half a time, or three and a half years, some translations say, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed forth water like a river to overtake the woman and sweep her away with a torrent.

But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman, and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring, those who obey God's commands and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And then, what is verse one, and the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.

And what happens in chapter 13 is you find too, when Satan stands on the shore of the sea, he seems to do so to summons two helpers. Which we find in chapter 13 in the form of two other beasts. A beast that comes out of the sea, and a beast that comes out of the earth.

And these two beasts are called upon by Satan then to help him in pursuing the woman's offspring, and making war with them, and attempting to destroy them.

Now before we understand this text, it's important to place it within its historical context. And particularly the historical context of the book of Revelation.

Revelation is clearly addressed to seven churches that are located in the ancient area of Asia Minor, or modern day western Turkey. Which, those seven churches are all ensconced within the Greco-Roman Empire, within Roman rule. And one of the features of the seven cities, it's interesting, most of the seven cities all had, all of them had either imperial temples.

That is, temples that were erected in honor of the emperor. Or, and or they had temples devoted to pagan gods. And it was expected that Christians or citizens, those who found themselves within the confines of the Roman Empire.

It was expected that they would worship and engage and participate in activities of worship for the pagan gods, but also for the emperor himself. After all, Rome was viewed as that which produced, or usually Rome was viewed in a positive light. That is, Rome was responsible for producing and giving peace to all of those who were within its empire, and within its borders.

Everyone owed a debt of gratitude to Rome and the emperor because of the peace and the prosperity, economically, that people enjoyed. All of that was the result of Rome, Roman rule, and the Roman emperor. We've already seen that the patron-client relationship, that patron-client dynamic probably operated with the Roman emperor in relationship to the subjects of Rome.

That is, again, since Rome and the emperor was seen as responsible for the well-being of the people, in terms of the peace it provided, and the economic prosperity. People then owed a debt of gratitude to Rome and the emperor, and needed to express that as the appropriate expression of a client to his or her patron. We've also

seen, though, that the political and economic life of Rome would have been intertwined, inextricably intertwined, with the religious life.

Again, Rome was often associated with the goddess Roma, and we've already said all of these cities would have had temples built in honor of the emperor, in the sight of the imperial cult, a system of worshiping the emperor, showing a debt of gratitude to the emperor, showing one's allegiance to the emperor, but also other Roman gods. In fact, most businesses or business opportunities, including whether it was a textile business, or whether it was commercial business, or even a trade, working with the shipping trade, almost all of them would have been wrapped up with occasions for worshiping the emperor or pagan gods. And so one can begin to see, in the face of all these opportunities to participate in pagan worship or worship of the emperor, For Christians, the question arises, to what extent can I participate in the life and culture of Rome, and Roman society, which would include participating in its religious practices, and its idolatrous practices, to what extent could one do that, and still maintain one's allegiance and loyalty to the person of Jesus Christ? Some Christians refused to participate in the life of Rome, especially in the imperial cult, and opportunities to worship the emperor and other pagan gods, and refused to do that because it was inconsistent with the exclusive worship that belonged to God and to Jesus Christ, and therefore would suffer the consequences, perhaps through loss of job, or other types of persecution.

One person has already died, according to the book of Revelation, though it doesn't appear that there's anything like a widespread empire-wide or officially sanctioned persecution yet. Most of the persecution, especially those that resulted in death, would have been more at a local level, and would have been more sporadic. It would have been local elites who were putting pressure on Christians to conform.

After all, they don't want their city to appear ungrateful or rebellious against Rome because of refusal to participate and show gratitude towards the emperor by participating in various occasions of showing allegiance or worshipping the emperor or even other pagan gods. So most of the pressure to conform came at a local level. The other response to this situation would have been compromise.

Many Christians probably didn't give it a second thought regarding what they were doing. They were quite willing to participate in the Roman economy and to make a living and become wealthy, but also in doing so to participate in the whole religious system of emperor worship and even the worship of other pagan gods. So this is the situation that John appears to be addressing, Christians that are struggling with this reality.

Most likely Revelation was written, although there have been a number of dates proposed, the most popular one is that Revelation was written towards the end of the first century, actually about the middle of the last decade of the first century, under the rule of the emperor named Domitian. The genre of Revelation, unlike the Roman 6 text we just considered, the genre of Revelation that we spent some time talking about under genre criticism, but Revelation consists of a unique blend of a three-fold genre. First of all, it belongs to the genre of an apocalypse, or at least that's the label we've given this literary type.

That is a type of literature that records the visionary experience of a seer who sees a vision of the heavenly world and of the future and couches that vision in highly symbolic language. The purpose of this is to help the reader see their own reality in a new light. So by writing in the literary genre of an apocalypse, John is trying to get his readers to see their situation in a new light.

To get them, especially for those who are compromising, to get them to wake up and see what is really at stake. To see a different perspective on their situation, a transcendent or heavenly perspective that John has been revealed to John and now he passes on in writing to his churches. We've seen it's also a prophecy, in that this is primarily a proclamation, a message that addresses in terms of comfort, but also exhortation and warning, addresses God's people.

It's also an epistle, in that the author communicates a message that is relevant to his readers. It meets a specific situation and occasion, therefore it must be something that could have been understood. So when we read Revelation 12 and 13, any interpretation of its images or symbols or the text as a whole, that John could never have intended and his readers could never have picked up on or understood, is probably to be rejected.

So in light of that background, let's look more specifically at chapters 12 and 13 of Revelation. Hopefully I won't slip and say that too often. Revelation 12 and 13 follows a section in chapter 11 that describes or discusses the two witnesses.

The discussion of the two witnesses portrays the role of the church in the context of the trumpet. Remember the trumpet plagues in chapters 8 and 9, modeled on the Exodus. After portraying these seven trumpets, now in chapter 11 John addresses the question of what is the church's role in all this.

He portrays in terms of two witnesses that the church is to be a faithful witness even in the face of suffering. Even in the midst of opposition and suffering. Interestingly, in chapter 11 John describes a beast that comes out of the abyss and makes war with these two witnesses.

Actually defeats them. So chapters 12 and 13, I think, go into even more detail than chapter 11 to ask what is the source, the true source of the church's conflict. It goes into more detail concerning this conflict between the two witnesses or the church and the beast.

Now we're going to see in chapters 12 through 13, the author addresses in even more detail this conflict between the beast and between God's people, the church. As we look at chapters 12 and 13, then we have to also need to ask what is the meaning of some of the symbols. What events might be being referred to in chapters 12 through 13? When do they occur? Is this describing things that happened in the first century? Or is it describing events that happened at the second coming of Christ, at the end of the world? So we'll need to deal with those questions that I think are unique to Revelation as an apocalypse, as a prophecy as well.

Chapters 12 through 13 need to be treated together because they form a unit. Primarily revolving around these three beasts and also the woman and her offspring. But we find three beastly or beast or dragon serpentine type figures.

We find a dragon playing the central role in chapters 12. But then we see in chapter 13 two other beastly figures that are actually we'll see described in very similar terms as a dragon. And we've already seen that the dragon ends up standing on the seashore as if he's looking for or ready to summons more help.

And he does so by calling two beastly figures that resemble him and are described in a very similar way to the dragon of chapter 12. So chapter 12 and 13 form a unit. And again these three beastly figures probably form what some interpreters have called an unholy trinity.

That is in contrast to the references throughout the book of Revelation. Between from God the Father, the Almighty, the Sovereign One, and the Lamb, Jesus Christ the Lamb. And then finally the Spirit, the Holy Spirit that is described in various ways such as the seven spirits of God.

Now as a parody of that we find an unholy trinity that is the dragon. And then this beast number one that is often referred to as the Antichrist. That which is contrary to that which is anti, the person of Christ.

And then finally beast number three which would correspond to the Holy Spirit perhaps. And whether there's a precise correspondence there might be a little bit of overlap. There does seem to be a clear parody between the three beastly figures here and the trinity of God, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Spirit.

Which is referred to already back in chapter 1 of Revelation. So to narrow it down and look at chapters 12 and 13 in more detail. Starting with chapter 12 and what we want to do is be alert both to number one the symbols.

And perhaps their background and their meanings and what they refer to. But then also how the narrative develops. And again we said part of the genre of an apocalypse is it's a narrative account of a visionary experience.

So much like narrative literature there's a story, a movement, a narrative. And it's not enough just to isolate the symbols and ask what they mean. But to be alert to the whole text and what it's doing.

So the first interesting symbol we're introduced to in chapter 12 is this woman with 12 stars on her head. And much of this comes from the Old Testament. Probably the woman here is symbolic of Old Testament Israel.

And we'll see though that in the rest of the chapter this reference to Israel as God's people will merge into Jesus' own followers. Who at the very end of chapter 12 are described as those who keep... See chapter 12 and the very last verse. Those who obey God's commands and keep the testimony of Jesus.

Clearly a reference to his church, Jesus' followers. So in a sense we're going to see the one people of God from the perspective of Israel. But then also the people of God through Jesus Christ that includes Gentiles as well.

His church. Although the author doesn't clearly indicate when one merges into the other. But mainly he's interested in portraying the one people of God.

Consisting of both Israel and God's people, the church as well. But we're going to see chapter 12 seems to follow a story. Beginning with this woman who again probably represents God's people in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel.

And this woman is portrayed as about to give birth to a child. And before we look at the identity of that child though, the author introduces another figure. This hideous dragon that's function in this text is to pursue the woman.

Because the woman is pregnant with a child who is identified clearly to point to an Old Testament illusion. This child is identified as a male child who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. A clear allusion back to Psalm chapter 2 and verse 8. Which an Old Testament psalm is often seen depicted as a royal psalm or a messianic psalm.

That is picked up in the New Testament in reference to Jesus Christ. So the author by alluding to the Old Testament makes it clear that the child that this woman is pregnant with is none other than Jesus Christ. The messianic ruler, the son of David.

Who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter in fulfillment of Psalm chapter 2. So now the dragon pursues the woman in order to devour and destroy this child. But as the text clearly indicates, the child is rescued from the clutches or the teeth of this dragon. And is raised up and ascends to heaven.

Therefore frustrating the dragon and depriving the dragon of its prey. Now this, one interesting thing is this story as told in this text. Although one can clearly identify it with another story that we'll mention in just a moment.

Also reflects a common story in the Greco-Roman world. That is there are a number of Greco-Roman myths that follow a similar story or narrative. That is a goddess who is about to give birth to a son.

And a dragon or beast figure that pursues her and tries to devour the son. And usually the son is, sometimes the woman gives birth to the son. And in one story the son is taken to an island until he grows up.

And then he comes back and he slays the dragon that was pursuing the woman in the first place. And usually the son is a god, one of the Greco-Roman gods. But John seems to take this story, not to buy into that myth.

But to take a common story and to show this story actually has historical reality. That is, it's difficult to read Revelation 12 and not see, at least in summary form. In very different form, more symbolic form, the story of the birth of Christ.

But notice it's compressed. No sooner is the child born than he is swept up to heaven and raised and ascends to heaven. So in this we see in compressed form a reference to the birth and actually the life and then the resurrection and ascension of Christ to heaven.

Thus frustrating the dragon's attempt to kill and destroy the son. It's very interesting that the dragon later on in verse 9 is identified, again the author identifies it for us by linking this dragon to an Old Testament reference. He says, The dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray.

That reference to the ancient serpent clearly identifies this dragon of Revelation 12 with the snake, the serpent that deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And identifies him as the devil or Satan. Using terms you find elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to this primary antagonist of God and his purposes.

We'll return to that in just a moment, that reference to Genesis. But a couple of other important references is first of all, note that this woman flees to the desert. Again we shouldn't ask questions about geographically where this takes place and what is going on.

The desert was simply symbolic of preservation at this point. So by having the woman flee to the desert, the idea of this is God now protects his people. Though the dragon pursues her, God keeps and protects his people and cares for them.

So again the woman is not referring to a literal actual woman, but is symbolic. Again this may reflect the Old Testament notion of referring to God's people as a woman, as a wife, as the bride of Yahweh or something like that. So even in the Old Testament you find a woman often symbolizing the people of God, Israel in the Old Testament.

So by having this woman flee into the desert, this is a clear indication of her preservation and safety. And God keeping her and caring for her even in the face of the wrath of this dragon figure, who is identified as Satan. But a further reference is

following that you have this interesting story in 7-9 of Satan warring with Michael and his angels and being defeated and cast out of heaven.

And the question is, when did this take place? Where does this take place? Why does it happen here in the text? Most likely this is a further, starting with verse 7 through verse 12, this is a further explanation. In other words, this is probably not a chronologically happening after 1-6. So it's not saying the dragon did this and then following that, then we have this event taking place in history.

But instead I think verses 7-12 are going back and explaining in more detail what happens in 1-6. And so you have this battle between Michael and his angels. Remember apocalyptic literature deals with transcendent heavenly reality as a reflection of what's taking place on earth.

So now, in true apocalyptic fashion, John sees this heavenly vision of this war in heaven where Michael and his angels fight against this dragon that we've been introduced to in verses 1-6. And his minions, or his angels, and they fight and engage in battle. And in verses 8-9, Satan is cast down and is defeated.

And one wants to know, when did this take place and what event is this referring to? I think the key is to read verses 10-12. And particularly verses 10-11, then I heard a loud voice. Voices in Revelation often interpret events.

So you'll find certain persons, heavenly voices or hymns or angelic beings saying things. Often the speeches or the voices or songs in Revelation interpret events that take place. And I think verses 10-11 probably interpret this event of Michael and his angels defeating the dragon and his angels.

Verse 11, I'll read it again. Then I heard a loud voice saying, Now have come the salvation and power and kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ, for the

accuser of our brothers who accuse them before our God day and night has been hurled down. Verses 7-9.

They overcame him, that is these accusers, which I take it are God's people, they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. I think verses 7-9 is again a symbolic portrayal of the defeat of Satan and his angels at the death of Jesus Christ. The blood of the Lamb or the death of Jesus Christ was the ultimate defeat of Satan and his angels.

So as I said, 7-10 is interpreted by this voice in 10-12 further describes what's going on in 1-6. The true source of Satan's defeat then is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. And this further explains then why he tries to devour the woman, why he goes after the woman and why she needs to be put in the desert to be rescued and secure is verse 12.

The devil, the dragon that has been cast down, he is now filled with fury because he knows that his time is short. So what we're going to read in the rest of 12-13 is a result of what happens in the first part of 12. Satan has been defeated and cast down, he's been deprived of his ability to destroy the child.

Now, because he's been defeated, he's been cast out of heaven at the death of Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ, the death of Christ has spelled the defeat of the dragon. So now that he knows his time is short, now he's going to unleash his wrath and fury on the woman and her offspring. So that brings us to the rest of chapter 12.

When the dragon saw he had been hurled down, now he goes after the woman, which we said symbolizes God's people. But probably now the woman is more than just the nation of Israel. The woman includes those, as chapter 12 ends, those who keep God's commands and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which clearly would be a

reference to the new people of God, both Jew and Gentile, making up the church that belonged to Jesus Christ and are God's people by virtue of belonging to Christ.

But there's an interesting contrast going on here that, again, if we try to make sense of it at a literal level, we'll result in doing one thing with it, but I think the best way to make sense of it is to read it symbolically, as Revelation, as the genre of Revelation, I think asks us to read it. And that is, you'll note that there's a contrast between the woman and her offspring. We've said the woman refers to the people of God, but then who are the woman's offspring? Are these someone else? Is the woman Israel and her offspring are somebody else, the church perhaps, or Gentile? How are we to understand the woman and her offspring? Are these two separate entities? Well, if we read it literally, that would seem to be the case, but I think better is to understand in true apocalyptic fashion, we need to read this symbolically, so the woman and her offspring, however, it does not make sense at a literal level.

At a symbolic level, they probably both refer to the same thing. The woman and her offspring are probably both symbolic of the people of God. But, they're probably symbolic of the people of God from two different perspectives.

Notice, as we've already said, the woman, back in verse 6, flees to the desert, where she is to a place already prepared by God, where she is taken care of for 1260 days. Then notice in verse 14, the dragon now goes after the woman, and it says, based on the fact that he was not able to destroy this child, Jesus Christ, who is to rule the nations with an iron scepter, and based on the fact that it's through his death and resurrection that Satan has been destroyed and cast out of heaven and defeated, now, in his anger, he goes after this woman, but verse 14, the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times, and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. So, in both of these images, you have this woman going to a

place, the desert, where she is preserved and taken care of, out of the reach of Satan, yet, after that happens, starting in verse 17, after all attempts to destroy this woman, even when he can seem to get to her, the earth opens up and devours Satan's attempt to destroy the woman, so the woman is preserved, Satan can't get at her.

So, he gets angry in verse 17, and he goes after the rest of her offspring, who, apparently, he is able to get at. So, what are we to make of this? If the woman and the children refer to the same thing, how can Satan not get at the woman, but he can pursue her offspring? I think, this is John's way of suggesting, God's people, the church, on the one hand, are kept and preserved, Satan cannot ultimately destroy them and touch them. Yet, that's the perspective of the woman.

Yet, from the perspective of her offspring, God's people might suffer persecution, some of them even death. Yet, ultimately, God's church and his people, especially spiritually, cannot be harmed and cannot be destroyed. Physical persecution cannot serve to destroy the relationship of God's people to God himself.

And we'll see, ultimately, through a new creation, God indeed will vindicate his people. So, ultimately, no matter how much Satan can cause problems for God's people physically through persecution, that's the perspective of the offspring. Even though he can cause problems for the church physically and temporally, from the perspective of the woman, ultimately, the church cannot be harmed and destroyed.

They are still God's people that he will keep, and he will keep his promises to them. So, the woman and her offspring probably refer to the same entity, the church, the people of God, yet it's looked at from two different perspectives. They're preserved spiritually, yet they're still subject to persecution at the hands of this dragon.

The last two things I want to look at is, we've already talked about that number of three and a half years in verse 14, or time, times, and half a time, and I've already suggested this language should not be taken literally to refer to a specific period of time in the past or in the future, but the three and a half years is symbolic of the entire period of the church's persecution, starting in the first century. Again, John is trying to help the churches make sense of what it is they are experiencing under Roman rule, especially for Christians who are suffering, or even for those who aren't, but need to be made aware of the need to stop compromising and to embrace Jesus Christ, no matter what the consequences. John now is trying to help them to understand the true nature of their conflict.

So, I take it the three and a half years is referring simply to the entire period of the church's existence, as it struggles with persecution that is instigated primarily by Satan. The whole entire period of the church's conflict with the world, that John is now making clear, behind that stands none other than Satan himself. One other dimension to add to this story is to go back to that reference to Satan in verse 9, where he is described as the serpent of old, making a clear intertextual connection to Genesis chapter 3. I want to look at this text again, but first of all I want to read Genesis 3, 15-16, and then with that text resonating in our ears, go back to Revelation chapter 12 and 13, and note possible correspondences.

So, chapter 3, right after Satan tempts Adam and Eve to sin through deception, which is interesting, notice it in verse 9 of chapter 12 of Revelation, the dragon is called the one who leads the entire world astray. Satan is portrayed primarily as a deceiver, and that's exactly how he gets Adam and Eve to sin, by deceiving them. But then, following that, God then begins to speak to the serpent and to the woman in verses 15 and 16, to the serpent and to Eve.

To the serpent he says, I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head, that is, the woman's seed will crush your head, the serpent's head, and you, the serpent, will strike his heel, that is, the seed of the woman's heel. And then verse 16, to the woman he said, I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing, with pain you will give birth to children.

Now keep all those elements in mind, and go back and read Revelation chapter 12 and 13. Notice that it begins with a conflict between the woman and the dragon, a battle or conflict between the woman and the dragon over her son. And even after the son is born, the dragon goes after the woman.

So that's the first part of the Genesis 3 verse 15. But also note that what happens is, the dragon then ends up going, not after the woman, but after the woman's seed. Notice that language of seed.

But then one could ask, well doesn't Genesis say that the dragon's seed will go after the woman's seed? Well this is where chapter 13 comes in, Revelation. These two beastly figures are the seed of the dragon. They're described just like him.

He stands on the seashore at the end of 12 to summons them. So you have both of those elements. There's conflict between the dragon and the woman in chapter 12, and there's also conflict between the dragon's seed, chapter 13, and the woman's seed in chapter 12 and 13.

Notice that reference though in the Genesis account in 3.15 to bruising, bruising the heel, which simply may refer to Satan going after, he wants to devour the son. And so he's able to bruise his heel, especially through the death of Jesus Christ. But then it says that the son, the woman's seed, will crush his head.

And the question is, where do we find the head of the dragon crushed? Well, in a way you could infer that the battle and defeat of Satan in 7 through 12 of chapter 12 of Revelation is the crushing of Satan's head. But if you jump over, although this isn't a reference to the dragon specifically, but to one of the dragon's offspring, notice that beast number one, who is described just like the dragon, notice what it said about him. Verse 3 of chapter 13, describing this beast, it says, One of the heads of the beast seemed to have a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed.

Now there may be other things going on, but it appears to me that, I think two in particular. Number one, I think this is a parody of Jesus Christ. In other words, it's portraying the beast in the same way that Jesus Christ was dead and is now alive, chapter 1 of Revelation, now the beast appears to be able to mimic Christ.

He's so powerful. But second, I think this is probably an allusion back to the Genesis account. This is the crushing blow to the head of the dragon through crushing the head of one of his followers, one of his offspring.

Also notice another interesting thing at the very beginning of chapter 12. Notice how the woman is described. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as about to give birth, which probably reflects Genesis 3.16 and the promise of the woman that she would give birth through pain, that she would give birth to children, that she would cry out in pain.

Now the question though is, what's the significance of this? What might be the interpretive significance of this allusion to Genesis chapter 3? How does that make a difference in the meaning of the text? I think it might be this. We've already seen that one of the things going on in chapters 12 and 13, John is trying to help his readers understand the true nature of their conflict. To go back to the background of

Revelation, for Christians living in the Roman Empire, many of them experiencing hostility at the hands of Rome, this now is explaining the true nature of their conflict.

And what John does is he places their conflict in the first century in part of a larger story or narrative that goes all the way back to creation. As if John wants to tell his readers, what you are experiencing at the hands of Rome should not be a surprise. It's nothing less than part of an age-old conflict that goes all the way back to creation.

What you see going on is simply this ongoing conflict that goes all the way back to the beginning of creation. And now you simply see it emerging again in your story. Although the linchpin though is that Christ has already dealt the death blow.

Satan is already defeated and knows his time is short. So the Christians in Asia Minor of the first century, and we might indeed say Christians in any age that find themselves in similar situations, can take heart because, number one, they know this is nothing less than a story, an age-old story, a conflict that goes all the way back to creation. And second, Christ has already dealt the death blow and defeated the enemy, the primordial enemy, Satan, and therefore his time is short.

Therefore, they can respond appropriately. They can hang on and not become overwhelmed and discouraged because now they're able to see their situation from a new perspective and in a new light. So these chapters portray then and explain the true nature of the church's struggle in the first century.

Again, empirically, they look out and see the Roman Empire and the pressure to conform and all that the Roman Empire does. But John then, in true apocalyptic fashion, portrays a different perspective and says things aren't as they really appear.

But behind what you see in the world is this age-long struggle and even a heavenly battle that determines what is going on in the present.

It helps them put their conflict in the context of God's larger, broader intention for history and for his people. In chapter 13, then, we are introduced, as I said, to two of Satan's cohorts. He stands on the sea to summons two other followers that emerge from both the earth and the sea.

These two beasts probably have their background in both the Old Testament. Sometimes you find beastly figures or dragon-like figures. We looked at Isaiah chapter 51 and verse 9. The Rahab, the serpent that is pierced through, the serpent of the sea.

So you find this idea of beasts associated with the sea in apocalyptic literature, but also in the Old Testament. Sometimes you find the notion of two beasts, often labeled the Behemoth and the Leviathan. John may have that text and other texts in mind.

But he's clearly drawing on rather traditional imagery, taking beast or dragon-like figures and using them symbolically to refer to various persons or nations. So when I read this text here, most likely, well, to back up, when I read this text, we need to then ask, first of all, what is the meaning or connotations communicated by these beastly figures? And second, what or whom might they refer to? So first of all, by using beastly, serpentine, dragon-like figures, whether in the Old Testament or apocalyptic literature or even in Greco-Roman literature, a beast or serpent-like figure usually symbolizes features of evil and chaos and antagonism, destruction, everything opposed to life and order, etc. So by portraying, by referring to a beast, I think John wants to communicate all those things.

Whatever he's referring to, he wants to associate it with beastly figures of the past, or beastly figures in other literature. That is, those persons or events or nations associated with chaos and evil, and that which is inimical, that which is demonic, that which is destructive. The question, though, is to what do these two beasts in chapter 13 refer? Starting with the first one, I find it very difficult that a first century reader, again remember, Revelation is a letter, it's a prophecy, it's trying to communicate a message to the first readers to make sense of their situation.

I find it difficult to think that a first century reader would identify this first beast with anything or anyone other than first century Rome and perhaps the Roman Emperor. And so what the author is doing then, again, is trying, the readers look out in their first century context and see this glorious, colossal Roman Empire, and they see the Emperor on his throne and he's responsible for peace and all these blessings and prosperity, and they're called upon to give him allegiance. What is the effect of John's portraying of the Roman Empire, or the Emperor himself, as a beastly figure? It's to get the readers to see it's not as it appears.

Actually, what lies behind the Roman Empire and the Emperor is this beastly figure that is associated with nothing less than the dragon, the age old serpent, that goes all the way back to the creation narrative. In fact, notice also how this beast is described, this beast number one, it says, men worshipped the dragon, or people worshipped the dragon, because he had given authority to the beast. So the dragon in chapter 12 gives his authority to the beast.

The beast is sort of now the representative of the dragon, and his sole goal is to point people towards the beast. So this, to be involved in Roman society, in Roman commerce, and to participate in opportunities to worship and show allegiance to the Emperor, is not as innocuous as it seems. But now, John says, behind it is nothing less than worshipping the dragon himself.

But who is the second beast? In other words, beast number one is the Empire, the Emperor, who demands worship, who rules over the entire Earth in the form of the Roman Empire, and perhaps the Emperor. Who is beast number two? Most likely, the second beast, you'll notice as you read verses 11 through 18 of Revelation 13, that the second beast is also described much like the beast number one, and also the dragon. Notice verse 11, he had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon.

So in some way, beast number two, again, is an offspring of the dragon. He represents the dragon. But it goes on and says, he exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf.

So the main function of the third beast, or the second beast, the beast from the land, in verses 11 through 18, is to point to, and direct attention to, and get people to focus on beast number one, the Roman Empire and the Emperor. Most likely, beast number two probably symbolized the local elites who fostered and even demanded people participate in pagan worship or in the Emperor worship, in the form of participating in the local economy or the local temples that were built and existed in the seven cities to which Revelation was addressed. Most likely, the second beast represents the elite, or at least anyone, anyone who promotes and fosters worshiping, and forces worshiping, the Roman Empire and the Emperor, through, again, through occasions for Emperor worship, the whole system of the Imperial cult, and even pagan worship and directing attention to Rome as the goddess Roma.

So probably, beast number two would represent anyone who is responsible for forcing persons to participate in that. Verse 14 is an interesting one. In verse 13 it says, He, the second beast, performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of people.

Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast, who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. Again, the setting up the image of the beast, is it possible that refers to the different local shrines in honor of the Emperor? But what I want you to notice is the connection between deceiving again, the ability to deceive the inhabitants of the earth in verse 14, and the description of the dragon back in verse 9. He leads the whole world astray.

So at the heart, at the heart of what is going on, it's as if John is saying that as the people look out and see this colossal empire and all the benefits that it provides, and all the glamour and glitter of the Roman Empire, what John wants to see is this is part of the ploy, this is part of the deceptive ploy that ultimately goes back to Satan himself. To deceive the readers into following the beast. To deceive the readers into thinking they can compromise their faith in Jesus Christ and allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God by participating in the idolatrous system of the Roman Empire.

Now John again, do you see what he's doing? He's shedding a completely new light on what's going on in first century Rome. In fact, note that they are the second beast representing those in charge of promoting the first beast, the Roman Empire, the Emperor. They are able to even level economic sanctions in verse 16 and 17 for those who refuse to comply.

Verse 18, I can hardly end by not saying something about verse 18, the famous number 666, and there have been all kinds of wild things done with that. One instance I always like to tell is one time when I was living in Minnesota in the United States, I went to a Christian music festival and we had to have wrist tags to get in and they all had a number and almost every one, the first six or seven numbers were identical, the last three were the ones that changed identifying, that was kind of your identification to be able to leave and get back into the events. I looked at mine as

soon as I got it and the last three numbers were 666 and some individuals may have made a big deal out of that and even refused to wear something like that.

But I think about that in terms of what is going on in this text and how does it relate to our modern day phenomena of seeing numbers, sometimes someone will have a phone number with 666 or you'll see license plates with 666 and what we make of those things in light of what's going on in Revelation. First of all, the first obvious principle to apply when thinking about modern day applications of this text is once again to evoke the principle, what could John have intended and what most likely would his readers have understood? And this, in my mind, automatically rules out all kinds of modern day speculation regarding computer chips embedded in a person or credit cards or the internet or identifying specific, whether it's Saddam Hussein or some other specific individual, all of that is far beyond the horizons of the first century author and reader. Furthermore, notice that this is not accidental, this is not just a coincidental occurrence of the number 666, especially when it naturally comes after 665 and before 667, but this is an intentional receiving of this mark by those who will indeed pay allegiance to and even worship to the beast.

So the 666 in Revelation 13 is not just a coincidental appearance of the number, it's an intentional act on the part of the readers to receive it and to embrace it and participate in it, whatever it is. Let me say two things. Number one, most likely this is to be seen symbolically as the counterpart of chapter 7, where the saints also receive a seal or a mark indicating their identification.

The seal or the mark here, 666, is meant to indicate the true identification of the followers of the first beast, the Roman Empire or the emperor. But second, out of all the possibilities, I think there are two that are compelling. Number one is the number 666 probably corresponds to at least one spelling of the name of Nero, one of the more well-known Caesars.

Revelation appears to have been written long after Nero, so that what John may be doing is simply using Nero, who was known for his harsh treatment and his cruelty and his evilness, using Nero as kind of a model or symbol for what's going on in the reader's present day. So 666 might be a way of them saying that what's going on is similar to what went on with Nero. Once again, in the same way we see evil and chaos, we see evil in an attempt to destroy God's people, now incarnate again in the emperor and the situation the readers faced.

Second, it's also possible that 666 falls short of the perfect number 7. 666 corresponding to, or 666 corresponding to the evil trinity, the dragon, beast number 1 and beast number 2, that fall short of the perfect number of 7, perhaps corresponding with the godly trinity of God and Jesus Christ, his Messiah and the Spirit. But in any case, again to put this text together, Revelation chapter 12 and 13 function in the book to explore and explain in a deeper level, more detail, the true nature of the conflict of the people of God in the first century, but I would argue in any age. The true nature of the conflict is not merely a physical one, but behind it lies a spiritual battle, a spiritual conflict, attempts of Satan and his ability to revitalize this ongoing battle, his ability to inspire human persons and institutions to set themselves up as God, arrogantly as God and to oppress and oppose, even kill God's people.

Chapter 12 and 13 then help God's people to come to grips with the true nature of the struggle and to be able to respond to it appropriately, to be able to resist ungodly oppressive powers, but be able to persevere under oppression and even the ultimate price of martyrdom or death. In a sense, Revelation chapter 12 and 13 is a symbolic narrative of what Paul says in Ephesians 6. Our battle is not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities and powers in the heavenly realms. Revelation 12 and 13 reminds its readers, your true battle is not with flesh and blood.

Not that that's not a real battle, that's not what Paul or John is saying. It is real, but the true nature of the battle is not a flesh and blood one with the rulers and authorities of the earthly realm, the emperor or the Roman Empire, but your true battle is a spiritual one with the rulers and authorities in the heavenly worlds that in true apocalyptic fashion lies behind the earthly battles that you face. So knowing the true nature of the battle, the readers, first century readers of 12 and 13 and in any century are better equipped to understand and to respond to any society or government or person that exalts themselves up as God and to resist that, but also to persevere and endure in the face of oppression and persecution.

So one more example of how application of various interpretive methodologies can help us to understand a text, to come to grips with its meaning in light of its original historical context, but also start to apply avenues for how we apply that text to ourselves as God's people who confess God's word as inspired scripture and through which God continues to speak to his people today.