

The Use of Greco-Roman Myths in Revelation 12 and 13

Over the last two weeks, we have seen that the Bible overwhelmingly condemns myths and sets its own truths in direct opposition to them (1Tim. 1:3-7; 4:6-10; 2Tim. 4:1-5; Titus 1:10-16; 2Pet. 1:16-21). Despite the Bible's clear warnings, many are falling prey to two forms of perversion with respect to the Bible and myths. The first group is drawn to myths in order to form their own personal theological system. This is an outgrowth of recent western infatuation with eastern mysticism and the new age movement. Our sister Kimberly Marshall has children wrapped up in this... The second group views the Bible as a collection of myths. Atheists in this group use this accusation to scoff at the God of the Bible; theists use this accusation to minimize accountability to the Scriptures or to "unlock" secret and deep knowledge of the Scriptures, falling into the same trap as the early Gnostics.

We have shown in our recent classes that the Bible is qualitatively different from myths. We have also discussed how the Bible at times will refer to pagan myths and present them in such a way as to mock them with the factual reality of the one true God and His only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ. In this lesson, we want to look at two such examples from the book of Revelation. Keep in mind that the Bible is not presenting these myths as true, but is rather presenting truth in such a way as to mock pagan systems rooted in these mythologies.

I. A Little Background: Roman Imperial Cult Worship in Revelation

- A. The Book of Revelation is written to first century Christians who were being persecuted and who were soon to be persecuted even further. It is a work of apocalyptic writing, which is written during a trying time in order to instill hope in those who are suffering.
- B. The writing of Revelation occurred during the reign of the Roman empire, the fourth kingdom of Daniel's prophecies (Dan. 2; 7). The Roman empire spent the better part of three centuries persecuting Christians and some of the worst persecutions occurred during the reigns of Domitian and Trajan at the end of John the Apostle's lifetime.
- C. The primary reason that Rome persecuted Christians was because of their refusal to worship the Roman emperors as gods. Roman persecution was the worst when emperors truly believed they were gods, something several emperors are well-attested for believing (e.g. Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Trajan).
- D. Imperial worship was used in the provinces in order to keep them in line with the might of Rome. Imperial cult altars and temples could be found throughout the empire, but especially in Asia Minor, and especially in the cities to which John the Apostle writes the book of Revelation.
- E. Several of the cities themselves were honored as *neokoros*, or chief cities among the empire for emperor worship. It is likely that the Asiarch mentioned in Acts 19:31 was the annual president and chief priest of the Commune of Asia, the local imperial cult worship governing assembly. *"The churches of the Book of Revelation were located geographically, organizationally, and culturally where the imperial cult was most heavily distributed."* (L. Thompson, *The Book of Rev.: Apocalypse and Empire* 160)

- F. Roman imperial terminology included: Benefactor, God, Son of God, Lord, Father, Savior, Gospel, and Peace. Such blasphemy is foremost attested to by Pliny's letter #96 to Trajan, just after the writing of Revelation.
- G. Against this backdrop, Revelation is written. The first half of the book primarily speaks to the judgments on the enemy and the majesty of the Lord. The second half of the book primarily speaks to the vile nature of the enemy. The latter is where we find the mockery of two pagan myths – the Apollo Myth in chapter 12 and the Nero Redivivus Myth in chapter 13.

II. The Use of the “Apollo Myth” in Revelation 12

A. The Apollo Myth

1. Leto was pregnant with Apollo by Zeus
2. Out of jealousy, Hera sent Pytho, the serpent, to attack Leto (her son was destined to destroy the serpent)
3. Zeus sent winds and carried Leto to an island (Delos), Poseidon hid the island under the water
4. Apollo later slays the serpent at Delphi and Delphi becomes the home of Apollo's oracle. He was typically depicted with the sun (“Phoebus”).

B. Roman emperors regularly depicted themselves as Apollo and connected themselves to the Apollo Myth.

1. Augustus connected his rule with the golden age of Apollo
2. Statue at Prima Porta Augustus shows the emperor's association with Apollo
3. Nero depicted himself as a golden Apollo in front of his gold house
4. Nero's coinage depicted him on one side and Apollo on the other
5. Nero depicted as Apollo at Moregine, south of Pompeii

C. Mythical combat tales between the gods and serpents/serpentine depictions of their enemies were common, especially in Greco-Roman mythology.

III. The Use of the “Nero Redivivus Myth” in Revelation 13:1-10

A. Nero's Life and Death (ruled 54-68 AD)

1. Nero was “Rome personified”
2. Nero thought he was divine
3. Nero persecuted Christians in 64 A.D.
4. Killed himself by stabbing neck (cf. 13:3); body never recovered which led to...

B. The Myth of Nero's Resurrection/Return/Revival

1. *“...for so far as the rest of his subjects were concerned, there was nothing to prevent his continuing to be Emperor for all time, seeing that even now everybody wishes he were still alive. And the great majority do believe that he is, although in a certain sense he has died not once but often along with those who had been firmly convinced that he was still alive.” (Dio Chrysostum, Discourse 21.10)*
2. *“Yet there were some who for a long time decorated his tomb with spring and summer flowers, and now produced his statues on the rostra in the fringed toga, and now his edicts, as if he were still alive and would shortly return and deal destruction to his enemies. ... In fact, twenty years later,*

when I was a young man, a person of obscure origin appeared, who gave out that he was Nero, and the name was still in such favor with the Parthians that they supported him vigorously and surrendered him with great reluctance.” (Suetonius, Life of Nero 57)

3. *“About this time Achaia and Asia Minor were terrified by a false report that Nero was at hand. Various rumors were current about his death; and so there were many who pretended and believed that he was still alive.” (Tacitus, Histories 2.8)*

C. God Intentionally Mocks the Nero Redivivus Myth

Sea Beast (i.e. Nero/Rome)	Jesus
<i>Revelation 13</i>	<i>Revelation 4-5</i>
given great authority by the dragon	authority from the Father
mortal wound healed	standing as if slain
receives worship	worshipped
names written on head	name written on Him
“who is like...?”	“Who is worthy...?”
name a mystery	name unknown
wears diadems	wears many diadems
followers marked on forehead	followers marked on forehead
followers from many nations, tribes, tongues, etc.	followers from many nations, tribes, tongues, etc.

D. The sea beast represents Rome in all its arrogance and blasphemy. The sea beast is crafted based on mixing imagery from Daniel 7 and the Nero Redivivus Myth. It is the fulfillment of prophecy as well as God’s mocking of pagan idolization of unworthy leaders and imperial Rome. The worship of Rome and her emperors was akin to worshipping Satan.

There is only one God and He has only one begotten Son Who Himself possesses the fullness of the divine nature. He has revealed His will in the Word, conveyed by the methodology of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guided the earthly penman to write in such a way as to connect with the lost and, at times, this included mockery of pagan systems whose theology was grounded in mythology rather than truth. Given the culture in which first century Christians began to be openly persecuted by the civil authorities in power, namely Rome, it seems beyond question that John was moved by the Holy Spirit to present the agents of Satan in a ridiculing way to contrast with the victorious Jesus whom the martyrs would die to serve.

I hope this short series has shown the importance of studying cultural context so that we can equip ourselves to defend against those who would fall prey to structuring their belief system in mythology rather than the Bible, or who would mistreat the Word of God by likening it to mythology. May we also all be prudent & wise to further understand the Word of God ourselves by developing our knowledge so that we can wield God’s sword most effectively.