

12:1 And 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 with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. ³ And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. ⁴ His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; ⁵ she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, ⁶ and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. ⁷ Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, ⁸ but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world -- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. ¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

The Woman in Chapter 12 has several layers of interpretation: First that she is the Virgin Mary. This follows logically from the statement that her child is the one to rule with a rod of iron, and is clearly meant to symbolize Christ. She is given an image of cosmic glory which is consistent with the honor given her in the medieval Catholic church, but not necessarily the primitive church. One possible explanation for this is comes from the legend that John, the disciple, took Mary to Ephesus with him and she lived there until her dormition/assumption. This may account for the special position of honor that she had there, as recorded in this book. The next level of interpretation is that the woman is God's people: first Israel, and now the church. This is consistent with all the images of the Church, God's people, being the 'bride', etc. the imagery here then would be that God's people labored in birth pains throughout their history to bring about the joyous miracle of the messiah's birth. The great red dragon, already identified as the devil, stood waiting to undo this miracle, but was thwarted by God's intervention. The entire gospel story is condensed into this brief vision: Jesus was born to the people of Israel, specifically to their ideal and lowly maiden, Mary. Satan provided a violent opposition for him throughout his entire earthly ministry, beginning with the slaughter of the innocents, continuing with the persecution of the Pharisees and the Jewish Authority, and culminating with his crucifixion. Jesus was rescued out of the jaws of Satan's plots by the Father himself, who raised him from the dead, and raised him to his place of supreme power and majesty in heaven. The church continues to languish in exile, away from God and her redeemer, but with the ascension of Christ, Heaven has been opened to human beings, and set aside as a place of purity and peace in the divine presence. This is perhaps John's explanation of the fact that the Church is so fiercely persecuted. That with the ascension of Christ, Satan was cast out of heaven, and removed from any

¹² Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" ¹³ And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. ¹⁴ But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵ The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which 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 offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea. ^{RSV}

13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. 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 to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. ⁴ Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" ⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and

possibility of real power. So now he is devoted to persecuting the church. The remainder of the vision in this chapter may be a visionary description of the assumption of the Virgin, and it may be the description of the coming of the Holy Spirit, as the defender of the church. The church, being protected by the spirit is safe from the assaults of the dragon, but there are others who are not in the church who keep the commandments of God or bear testimony to Jesus that are not safe from his assault. This has been interpreted as the splintering off of sects from the church, which do not receive the direct life-giving outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but which continue to follow the teachings of Jesus as best they are able. Clearly, however, the whole church, Catholic or otherwise, is under continued assault from Satan. It is worth noting how many strong parallels there are between John's description of this vision and legends, myths, and scriptures of several minor middle eastern religions: Is John deliberately taking up the images of pagan religions to show that they really were attempting to describe the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ? Or is this merely coincidence?

Chapter 13 takes its shape largely from the Book of Daniel. John takes the images of Daniel and shapes them into a sort of counterfeit trinity: an economy of spirits which mocks God by imitating Him, but is wholly opposed to Him. The Dragon, as already mentioned is clearly Satan. The Beast, as mentioned in Daniel, is earthly empire, presumably in this case, the Roman Empire. This presumption is reinforced by the fact that the beast is a flagrant blasphemer: and we know from the early chapters of the Book that from Julius Caesar on, Roman leaders had been deified, and were addressed as 'lord and god', and that they were routinely worshipped in temples, and that civil life in many places revolved around this blasphemy. The seven heads and ten horns are commonly interpreted as the emperors of rome and the three consuls that came before them, Domitian being the tenth to rule

blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; ⁶ it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. ⁹ If any one has an ear, let him hear: ¹⁰ If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. ¹¹ Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. ¹³ It works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; ¹⁴ and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived; ¹⁵ and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. ¹⁶ Also 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, ¹⁷ so that

Rome since the Gracchi, and the seventh since Augustus and the start of the Empire. The mention of one of the heads having a mortal wound seems to be a reference to Nero, who was murdered, but according to a widespread legend of unknown origin would return to his reign of terror, assisted by the wonder people would have at his return to life. The alterations in the original image of Daniel's visions seem to directly correlate to the transition of the vision being about the Greek Empire under Alexander to the Roman Empire under Domitian. The third member of the Satanic Trinity is the second beast, with horns like a lamb's horns—meaning it is an impostor Christ—an Antichrist. The authority of Rome would have been nothing without the local governors and other assorted political underlings who enforced Roman law and practice. Among the most consistent interpretations of the second beast are that this is meant to represent the Roman political machine, and its local operatives, who were actually responsible for encouraging people to emperor worship, and persecuting those who wouldn't. One of Rome's great tactics for control of outlying provinces was to replace all local currency with one unified currency, which had the emperor's image on it, and in the case of Domitian, there were titles around the image of the emperor, one of which was 'lord and god.' So for John Roman coins became pagan idols. Another possible interpretation of this second beast is that it represents some later empire which incorporates religious doctrine into its legal structures in order to better control the people. Some medieval Christian commentators suggested that Islam was such an empire, with the prophet 'looking like a messiah' but leading people away to violence and idolatry; some reformer commentators suggested that Roman Catholic Christendom itself was such an empire. The number, which is the source of much speculation is not well understood: some ancient manuscripts of Revelation have the number as 616 instead of 666. It has been demonstrated through many ingenious techniques that

<p>no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six.</p>	<p>just about anyone's name could be cryptographically analyzed and made to total 666. The two most likely candidates are Domitian and Nero, with Nero being the more preferable, because the Hebrew transcription of Neron Caesar when added up equals 666, and Nero Caesar equals 616, and it satisfies both manuscript traditions, lending some weight to its validity as an early interpretation.</p>
<p>14:1 Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And 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 harpers playing on their harps, ³ and 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 hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless. ⁶ Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; ⁷ and he said with 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 fountains of water." ⁸ Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion." ⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with</p>	<p>This chapter serves as a brief interlude of peace and comfort. It contrasts the chaos and suffering which surround the descriptions of evil in previous chapters with the bliss of those who follow the Lamb. It then goes on to introduce some themes which will be picked up in much greater detail in subsequent chapters: God's wrath, and Babylon the Great. Babylon becomes the name of the earthly empire, be it Rome or any other, which sets itself up in opposition to God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Babylon was the empire which conquered the Jews and led them into exile, it was then conquered, and set them free to return to the promised land. The correlation here is clear: the end of earthly empire means that the exile of God's people is over and that they are free to return to the promised land: true worship of God in his presence. The bowls of wrath and the torments of the wicked described here are the cause of some upset by modern readers of this book. It is however, quite unfair to start reading the book literally just at this point. This is the continuation and strengthening of John's message that those who pridefully set themselves up in opposition to God are doomed, because mortal powers are bound to die out. Only God is eternal, and the way to eternity is by repenting and living with God. John's figurative language is as much as saying that the worst thing anyone can do to themselves is to turn</p>

fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." ¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. ¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" ¹⁴ Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." ¹⁶ So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped. ¹⁷ And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; ²⁰ and 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.

away from God's love, worse than being burned with fire, or worse than the reek of sulphur, worse than anything we can imagine with our small human imagination. The chapter closes with a comforting message to persecuted Christians everywhere: that God has hallowed those who have died for Him; and that the time for the harvest, which includes the gathering of good fruit, and the burning away of the chaff, and rotten fruit.

One possible interpretation of all this judgment stuff is to look at it from the Biblical perspective of humanity being represented as all one organism: be it the woman in chapter 12, or as the 'Bride of Christ', or as the 'Body of Christ' or as Adam, or any of a countless other possible citations. This means that at the final harvest, it is the parts of each of us that are 'good fruit' are to be kept and saved, and the parts of us which are sinful are the chaff which is to be burned away. Is there any person who is wholly without goodness? Are there parts of even we who have been redeemed that we would be just as happy (if not happier) without, especially in the unfiltered presence of God? Just something to think about...perhaps the dividing line between what is redeemed and what is cast away is not as simple and straightforward as the division between one person and another.