Thoughts on Revelation 17

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# Introduction

The prophecy of Rev 17 is presented in 17:1-6a, and explained in 6b-18. Explaining something does not take one back to the first century or to the lifetime of the prophet, unless the prophet lived in the same timeframe as whatever is being explained to him. Explanations have to match their subject matter. In the present case, I suggest that John is being carried outside his own timeframe. He is seeing events from the perspective of the end time.[[1]](#footnote-1) Making this assumption is necessary if we wish to understand the available textual parallels.

In Rev 17 a beast has “seven heads and ten horns” (vs. 3); in Rev 13 a beast has “ten horns and seven heads” (vs. 1); and in Rev 12 a beast again has “seven heads and ten horns” (vs. 3). One would be tempted to begin studying Rev 17 by starting with these parallels. But the above passages describe a composite symbol that is made up of other earlier symbols. We must begin with the parts and pieces that go to make up the composite. In Dan 7 there are four separate animals, with a total number of heads equal to seven (1+1+4+1=7), and a total number of horns equal to ten (0+0+0+10=10). That is our starting point. Understanding Rev 17 well means comparing Dan 2, 7, 8, 11; Rev 12, 13, and 17.

# Daniel

In Dan 7 there is a series of four empires, but the last of these appears in two phases (IVa, IVb). In the prophecy both phases are parts of the fourth empire. A similar distinction is made in each of Daniel’s major apocalyptic prophecies.

Dan 2 speaks of iron (IVa) and also iron mixed with clay (IVb). In Dan 7 there is a nondescript beast (IVa) and also a little horn that rises out of it (IVb). Even in Dan 8 the little horn has two orientations (horizontal, vertical). The papacy was based in Europe and did not expand “toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land” (vs. 9), nor did it “destroy mighty men” (vs. 24). This is a horizontal orientation. Imperial Rome destroyed any number of mighty men in its various wars, but the papacy was never a military power. It had a vertical orientation toward spiritual things. My point is that Dan 8 refers to Rome in two phases – secular and spiritual. The papacy is prominent in Dan 8, but imperial Rome is not passed over in silence. Both are present. The same distinction can be seen in Dan 11:16-28, 29-45.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In one way or another the distinction between two phases of power under the fourth empire is present in all of Daniel’s major prophecies.[[3]](#footnote-3) See Table 1.

Table 1

World Empires in Daniel

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dan 7:4 | Babylon | I | 1 | - |
| Dan 7:5 | Medo-Persia | II | 2 | Dan 11:2b |
| Dan 7:6 | Greece | III | 3 | Dan 11:2b-15 |
| Dan 7:7 | Rome (secular) | IVa | 4 | Dan 11:16-28 |
| Dan 7:8 | Rome (spiritual) | IVb | 5 | Dan 11:29-45 |

History remembers Daniel’s fourth empire as two powers, but the prophecy portrays these as one empire in two phases.[[4]](#footnote-4) So in Daniel we could count as many as five phases of power. In contrast, the composite beast of Rev 17 has seven heads. Five is not seven. Why this difference? The answer is that John is seeing last events on a finer grid than Daniel and making more distinctions, without denying anything the earlier prophet said. We could focus on such differences and use them to drive a wedge between Daniel and Revelation, but doing that would be exegetically perilous. There are different viewpoints in the two books, but we must keep them together. There is more than one way to say the same thing.

# Revelation

## Revelation 12 and 13

Revelation 12. In Rev 12 John describes a woman who gives birth to a male Child, and whose Son is taken up into heaven (vs. 5). This is an obvious reference to Christ’s birth and subsequent ascension. After her Son returns to heaven, the woman flees into the wilderness pursued by a red dragon, where she would be taken care of for "1,260 days" (vs. 6), or 1260 literal years. In terms of Daniel's categories, the woman gives birth under empire IVa (secular Rome) and flees to the wilderness under empire IVb (spiritual Rome).

Rome second career in history would be greater than the first. If the words “but only for a time” in Dan 11:24 refer to prophetic time, its first career occupies 360 years – measured from the time Rome became an Empire initially to when Constantine moved its capital to Byzantium. Its second career, on the other hand, occupies 1260 years – three and a half times as long. Dan 11 does not mention an opposing king of the South during this period. It is strong throughout the Middle Ages.

Revelation 13. In Rev 13 the focus is no longer on the woman, but on the beast. The power which pursued her does not remain strong forever. According to Rev 13:3 it eventually suffers a devastating “wound.” After its wound, the sea beast is assisted by an earth beast. The fact that the one beast helps the other is an indication that we are seeing them at the same time in history. Then finally the wound heals. I should add that the earth beast is not mentioned in Daniel.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 1798 Pius VI was taken from Rome by a French army, and when this happened many thought the papacy had come to an end. The effect was politically catastrophic, but the institution survived. And its wound started to heal. In 1928 a Catholic, Al Smith, ran for President of the United States. He lost by 20%, but he ran. Over 75 years later in 2004 George W. Bush gave John Paul II the Presidential Medal of Freedom (With Distinction).[[6]](#footnote-6) Another pope, Francis I, would address both the General Assembly of the United Nations[[7]](#footnote-7)and a joint session of the United States congress.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 2017 Francis I would assist at the five hundred year anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (1517-2017) in Sweden. Separately, it is the case that six out of nine United States supreme court justices are currently Catholic.[[9]](#footnote-9)The wound continues to heal.

Rome’s second career was to be characterized by strength, then by weakness, then by renewed strength. It was strong for 1260 years; it is weak now, but is highly respected. When the wound finishes healing, “he must remain only a little while” (17:10).

## Revelation 17

Having established the contrast between the four empires in Daniel and their five phases of power, the composite nature of the beasts in Revelation, with one of the heads being wounded and then helped by another beast that should have been its competitor, such that while the one is weak the other is strong, we are now ready to start talking about Rev 17.

In Rev 17 John begins with a woman who has made common cause with a beast. When we compare this description with Rev 12, a similar beast had once pursued the woman. This is one reason why John is so amazed when he sees her (17:6b). She had changed dramatically. One thing that accounts for this change is the passage of time. The first time we see the woman is at the beginning of the 1260 days; the second time is at the end of the 1260 days. In Rev 12 she goes into a wilderness; in Rev 17 she has grown quite comfortable with the beast.

It is true that the animal which pursues her in Rev 12 is called a "great red dragon" (*drakōn*), whereas the animal in Rev 17 is called a “beast” (*thērion*). But both are red (*purros* [12:3], *kokkinon* [17:3]); both have “seven heads and ten horns” (12:3; 17:3); both are associated with a woman (12:4; 17:3); and both are seen in a wilderness (12:6; 17:3). Yes, many people remained faithful during the Middle Ages. Yes, there was a Reformation in the XVI century. But much of the church underwent a process of apostasy. That is John’s point here.

The beast that was wounded in Rev 13 is not wounded in Rev 17. Instead, the wound is sustained by one of its heads. One of the seven phases of beastly power is temporarily incapacitated. Its power to persecute has been removed. At the end of the 1260 days Berthier brought a French army to Rome and took Pius VI into exile. The year was 1798.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The preceding period is not dated by persecution, but it is characterized by persecution. This is the context for John saying one of the seven heads "is not." The text says that under head #6 the beast simultaneously "is" (*estin*, 17:10), and "is not" (*ouk estin*, 17:8, 8). This shows that the emphasis has shifted from empires to periods of time. No beast can simultaneously be and not be, but within the same period of time one power can be weak while another is strong.

The mysterious “eighth” is not a head; it is the beast. “As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction” (17:11). Here “the beast . . . is.” It "belongs to the seven" – not to “the seventh.” There is one beast with “seven heads and ten horns” (17:3). Notice “seven heads,” not eight heads. The “eighth” provides a close parallel between the dragon of Rev 12 and the beast of Rev 17. Satan has influenced each empire in turn, i.e., all seven powers that make up parts of the composite beast. Empires come and go; they follow each other. But Satan – ”that ancient serpent” – remains.

The purpose of Rev 17 is to give a historical overview. At the end of the series, while the papacy is weak, the United States is strong. Ours is the government that assists the papacy and ensures its recovery, and this continues happening now. We have not yet come to the period of the seventh head, but that part of the prophecy will be fulfilled in the very last hours of history, “and when he does come he must remain only a little while” (17:10). See Table 2.

Table 2

World Empires in Daniel and Revelation

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dan 7:4 | Babylon | I | 1 |  | - | 1 |
| Dan 7:5 | Medo-Persia | II | 2 |  | Dan 11:2b | 2 |
| Dan 7:6 | Greece | III | 3 |  | Dan 11:2b-15 | 3 |
| Dan 7:7 | Rome (secular) | IVa | 4 |  | Dan 11:16-28 | 4 |
| Dan 7:8 | Rome (spiritual) | IVb | 5 | Strong | Dan 11:29-39 | 5 |
| Weak | Dan 11:40-43 | 6 |
| Strong | Dan 11:44-45 | 7 |

In Table 3 the fourth column represents Daniel’s numbering of the various powers. The last column represents John’s numbering. Here being strong means having the power to persecute.

# Discussion

Trying to place Rev 17 in the first century is not useful. That chapter comes after the seven last plagues in Rev 16, and is introduced by “one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls” (17:1). This statement has chronological implications. It is followed by a description of the final punishments on Babylon in Rev 18. Rev 17 describes the church at a time later than the first century, and a time later than Rev 12. The woman needed time to fall so far, and to become comfortable with the beast that pursued her. Things have changed.

The word “judgment” makes sense in an end time context. The “great prostitute” has already done what she is about to be punished for. A verdict has been, or is being, rendered. John introduces her punishments in Rev 17, then describes them at some length in Rev 18. While the merchants of the earth “weep and wail over her” (Rev 18:9), the judgment in heaven agrees that God was fair to condemn her as it has (19:1-10), and finally Christ mounts a white horse and comes to the earth accompanied by all the angels of heaven (19:11-16). The wicked die the first death at His coming (19:17-21). The next thing is the millennium (20). This is a reasonable and comprehensive overview of last day events.

We now provide a summary of Dan 11; Rev 12, 13, and 17. We do include Dan 7, for lack of space, but the entire summary builds on a foundation initially laid in Dan 7. See table 3.

Table 3

Dan 11 and Rev 12, 13, 17

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dan 11 | Rev 12 | Rev 13 | Rev 17 | |
| 11:16-28 | Male Child |  |  | #4 |
| 11:29-39 | Fled to wilderness (12:6, 14)  1260 days (12:6)  3.5 times (12:14)  Water like a river (12:15) | 42 months  (13:5) |  | #5 |
| 11:40-43 |  | Wounded  (13:3a) | Sits on waters (17:1)  In the wilderness (17:3)  Rides the beast (17:3)  Blood of the saints (17:6) | #6 |
| 11:44-45 |  | Healed  (13:3b) | About [*mellei*] to rise from the bottomless pit (17:8a = Dan 11:44)  Destruction (17:8b = Dan 11:45) | #7 |

The whole logic of human empires in Daniel is that they rise and they fall. The “eighth,” however, is a power that remains – the work of Satan in seven periods of history. For this reason it is identified elsewhere as, “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan” (Rev 12:9).

# Conclusion

Trying to confine the "now" of Rev 17:8-9 to the first century raises a number of problems. It creates a second list of world empires (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, secular Rome, spiritual Rome), significantly different from the one provided in Daniel (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, secular Rome/spiritual Rome). It weakens the connection between the books of Daniel and Revelation in this and other ways. It strains the parallels among Rev 12, 13, and 17. All of this is unnecessary. In the various sources we have mentioned the Holy Spirit is speaking in slightly different ways, but is saying the same thing.

1. C. Merwyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 1 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 471-479. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Dan 11:28 two wars end; in 11:29-30a two wars begin. This is a point of transition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The four prophecies are Dan 2, 7, 8-9, and 10-12. Dan 9 is here considered to be part of Dan 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The distinction between Alexander and the successor kingdoms that followed him is not mentioned in Revelation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Recall that in Dan 7 the four beasts Daniel describes are said to rise from the sea, not from the earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wikipedia, ”List of Medal of Freedom Recipients.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ABC News, Meagan Keneally, "Pope Francis: What He Told the United Nations General Assembly” (September 25, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. New York Times, Peter Baker and Jim Yardley, "Pope Francis, in Congress, Pleads for Unity on World's Woes" (September 24, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. National Catholic Register, “6 of the 9 Supreme Court Justices are Catholic — Here’s a Closer Look” (<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/supreme-court-catholics>). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Persecution was sputtering to a half then. The last execution of the Spanish inquisition was in 1826. Joseph Pérez, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2004), 93-100. Persecution characterizes the period of 1260 days, but cannot be used to date it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)