

# More Thoughts on Revelation 17

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## Introduction

At issue is the chronological relationship between the prophecy of Rev 17:1-6 and the explanation of it in 17:7-18. The most secure basis for establishing this relationship begins with Daniel.

## Daniel

What follows is not a complete overview, but will suffice. In Daniel there are four empires, but the last (IV) divides into two phases (IVa, IVb). For all intents and purposes, then, there are five empires. And the last of these (IVb) divides into three phases (before, during, and after the wound of 11:40a).

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	Powerful (persecution)	Dan 11:29-39
				Wounded	Dan 11:40-43
				Powerful (persecution)	Dan 11:44-45

Anything we say about chronological relationships in Revelation must build on this foundation. It is perilous to allow Revelation to drift apart from Daniel, or Daniel apart from Revelation. It is imperative that we study the two books together.

## Revelation

In Rev 12 a symbolic woman gives birth to a male Child and her Son is taken up to heaven (vs. 5). She then flees to the wilderness where she is taken care of for "1,260 days" (vs. 6). Since in vs. 6 the woman no longer has her Child with her, but flees to the wilderness alone, we assume that vs. 6 takes place later than vs. 5. In terms of Daniel's categories, she gives birth under empire IVa and flees to the wilderness under empire IVb.

In Rev 13 the focus is not on the woman, but on the sea beast/earth beast consortium. The sea beast is wounded and while in this weakened condition is aided by the earth beast, until the wound heals. So the sequence is: the woman bears a male Child, and then flees to the wilderness; the beast which pursued her is wounded, and over time the wound is healed.

The woman who had fled to the wilderness in Rev 12 is nourished during "1,260 days" (12:6), or "time, times, and half a time" (12:14). The reason why she needs to be nourished is that she has been, and continues being, pursued during this time. The dragon's pursuit of the woman does not stop. The above pursuit takes two forms: a "dragon" chases her (12:3) and a "serpent" spews a river of water out of his mouth to sweep her away (12:15). The dragon has "seven heads and ten horns" (vs. 3). Unless we assume there are two pursuits, the dragon and the serpent are doing the same things. There are not two pursuing entities. At the end of the time during which the woman is pursued, the sea beast suffers a wound (13:3).

In Rev 17 John returns to both themes, i.e., what happens to the woman of chap. 12 and what happens to the beast of chap. 13. He sees the woman sitting on the waters with which the serpent sought to sweep her away (12:15; 17:1) and riding the beast that pursued her (12:3; 17:3). Three terms are used: "great red dragon" (*drakōn*), "serpent" (*ophis*), and "scarlet beast" (*thērion*). We should make the necessary distinctions, but not let them assume more importance than they have. The dragon of Rev 12 has "seven heads and ten horns" (12:3), and the beast of Rev 17 also has "seven heads and ten horns" (17:3). This similarity is intended to be instructive. Both link back to the world empires of Daniel, which is also intended to be instructive. In Rev 17 the "eighth" is "of the seven" (17:11), i.e., there is one power which seeks to influence each of the seven empires as they rise (see 12:9). So if the "dragon" is the devil and Satan and the "beast" is an overview of the world powers influenced by Satan, the effect is substantially the same.

The beast wounded in Rev 13 is not described as being wounded in Rev 17. Instead, the same information is conveyed in other ways, by saying that one of the heads "is not." More correctly, what the text says is that the beast both "is" (*estin*, 17:10) and "is not" (*ouk estin*, 17:8, 8). The text does not say that the beast "is not," but that one of its heads "is not." If we say that there is effectively no beast during the period when its sixth head "is not," and pull the timeframe for the sixth head back into the first century, that would imply that during the first century there is no beast. The world empire active (or inactive) during the first century was secular Rome. It would be hard to draw these different strands together historically. Rome was the power that exiled John to Patmos. Separately, we know that the beast is not dead during any part of this sequence, because the text says the eighth head "belongs to the seven" (17:11). In every age Satan has attempted to exert his influence on the current world empire.

During one of the seven periods something about the beast is weakened and another power stands in to help it. What John says is not that the beast "is not," but that there would be a time when it simultaneously "is" and "is not." Both the "is" and the "is not" pertain to the same period of time, i.e., the time of the sixth head. This is a reference back to Rev 13, where the sea beast is wounded and the earth beast assists and supports it. The earth beast "is" while the sea beast "is not."

In Rev 13 the wound is represented by the same beast. The beast that is wounded is the same as the beast that heals (13:3b). In Rev 17 the wound is one head and its healing is another (17:10). In Dan 11 the wound and its recovery (11:40-43) is followed by a brief period during which the king of the North flies into a rage, seeks to annihilate God's people, and immediately afterward comes to his end (11:44-45). In Rev 17:10, "he must remain only a little while." This is one body of information, revealed to different people at different times (Isa 28:10; Heb 1:1). In these chapters God is not revealing different things, but is merely revealing what He says in different ways. 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	Powerful (persecution)	Dan 11:29-39	5
				Wounded	Dan 11:40-43	6
				Powerful (persecution)	Dan 11:44-45	7

## Sequence Markers

### The prophecy

If being captured follows from being pursued, we would expect the time when the woman sits on the waters with which the dragon pursued her to come after the 1260 days. Similarly, if all of the beast's earlier heads are powerful but its sixth head is not, that represents a change, and the assumption must be that something caused it. A likely cause is the mortal wound of Rev 13:3. Thus, we would also expect the "is not" phase of the beast in Rev 17 to follow the 1260 days. We have made two deductions relating to time. The first has to do with the prophecy, the second with the explanation. Both lead to similar outcomes.

There are a number of sequence markers such as this. The woman goes into the wilderness to escape a "red dragon" (12:3), then comes out of the wilderness riding a "scarlet beast" (17:3). Chronologically, this fact places the second passage after the first. The words "dragon" (*drakōn*) and "beast" (*thērion*) are not the same, just as "dragon" (*drakōn*, 12:13) and "serpent" (12:15) are not the same, and yet our first hypothesis would be that the power which pursues the woman into the wilderness is the same as the power that spews out a river of water to sweep her away. Only the words used to describe them are different. We have something similar to this in Rev 12 and 17, where the "great red dragon" of 12:3 and the "scarlet beast" of 17:3 are not identical, but neither are they entirely separate. The terms "red" (*purros*) and "scarlet" (*kokkinon*) are substantially the same in meaning, and the references to heads and horns bind all three entities together. We need to capture the contrasts without missing the similarities. Satan influences the beast in every age, so if one is Satan and another is the series of world empires he influences, the context is still the same. Rev 12, 13, and 17 are closely parallel.

While the sea beast is recovering from its wound in Rev 13, it goes through a wilderness experience similar to that of the woman in Rev 12. Just as God nurtures the woman in the wilderness, the earth beast nurtures the sea beast during the time it is wounded (13:15-16). Wounding and nurturing take place during the same period in chap. 13, just as fleeing and nourishing take place during the same period in chap. 12.

Consider also the references to time in 12:6 (1260 days), 12:14 (3.5 times), and 13:5 (forty-two months). The spellings (days, times, months) are different, but the periods are the same. The three and a half times provide the timeframe for water being used to pursue the woman (12:14-15). There is no reference to a time period in Rev 17, but the reference to sitting on many waters presumes that the

waters have already been poured out. This happened initially during the forty-two months, so the act of sitting on these waters would naturally refer to a time after the forty-two months. The woman John sees is being seen at a time after 1798.

Consider also that the woman is already "drunk with the blood of the saints" (17:6) when John sees her. Thus, the persecution associated with the time period in Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5 has already taken place. This much has to do with the prophecy.

## The explanation

In his explanation the angel refers to the heads of the beast. If the male Child is born under head #4 (secular Rome), the woman flees to the wilderness after His birth and after He is taken up to heaven, i.e., under head #5 (spiritual Rome). She sits on many waters, rides the beast, and is drunk with the blood of the saints under head #6, after the beast's pursuit of her has had its full effect. During this same time, the angel tells John that the beast the woman rides "is about to rise from the bottomless pit" (*abussos*, 17:6). Thus, it has not yet occurred under head #6, and it soon will. What follows head #6 is head #7, so this is when the beast rises from the bottomless pit.

This raises a question as to what the bottomless pit means in this passage. If we say, it must mean the same thing here that it means elsewhere, it means two different things in other passages. To which of these are we obligated to compare the expression? Or if the other two are different (the fifth trumpet does not take place during the millennium), are we under obligation to compare the present use of the term with either of the above? I do not think so. The beast is in the bottomless pit, in the sense of Rev 17:8, during the period of its mortal wound. It rises from the bottomless pit by experiencing the healing of that wound. It is not in the bottomless pit under head #5 while exercising unlimited authority during the 1260 days. That experience is confined to head #6. See table 3.

Table 3  
Time Markers Relating to Rev 17

Dan 11	Rev 12	Rev 13	Rev 17	
11:16-28	Male Child		#4	#8
11:29-39	Fled to wilderness (6, 14) 1260 days (6) 3.5 times (14) Water like a river (15)	42 months (5)	#5	#8
11:40-43		Wound (3a)	#6	#8
11:44-45		Healed (3b)	#7	#8

## Discussion

The reader will have noticed that the wound of Rev 13 is mentioned in 13:3 and the 42 months in 13:5, allowing one to conclude that the wound precedes the 42 months. An assumption on which this conclusion rests is that the sequence of narration is linear. However, since Rev 13:12 describes what the second beast does "in the presence of the [first] beast," the two are active at the same time and the outline of the chapter is not linear. I suggest that 13:1-10 (sea beast) and 11-18 (earth beast) describe the same period of history, with both active at the same time, and similarly, that 13:1-4 and 5-10 also describe one period of history. Verses 1-4 and 5-10 are parallel narrations of events during one period of time. The point to draw from all of this is that the 42 months precede the wound, here as in Dan 11.

In regard to the woman, the woman enters the wilderness pure and emerges from it compromised. It is not the case that she starts in a compromised state and that her impurity gradually fades away. She becomes impure over time. This fact is evidence that when John sees the woman after her time in the wilderness has already come to an end. Another fact leading to the same conclusion is that in 17:6 she is already drunk with the blood of the martyrs. The 1260 days are over by the time John sees the woman in vss. 1-6.

Then, at the time when the angel explains what John has seen, the beast "is about [*mellei*] to rise from the bottomless pit" (17:8). This passage was mentioned above. The term *abussos* occurs seven times in Revelation (9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3) and these verses do not all apply during the same period of time. In chap. 9 the timeframe is that of the fifth trumpet; in chap. 11 the text does not say the "the beast that rises from the bottomless pit" is doing so at the moment, but only that the beast which does this is the same as one we have seen before. In chap. 20 an angel confines Satan to the bottomless pit at the beginning of the millennium. The fifth trumpet does not take place during the millennium, and it is not necessary to assume that chap. 17 does, any more than it is necessary to assume that chap. 17 takes place during the first century.

The millennial *abussos* simply refers to the fact that Satan has no one to tempt, and the *abussos* of the fifth trumpet merely means that spiritual Rome has lost its ability to persecute. The word *mellei* does not show that the beast has ascended from the pit under head #6, but rather that he soon will, under head #7. So head #6 is the time associated with the beast's wound, which takes place at the end of the 1260 days. Its power to persecute is restored under head #7 in the last moments of time before Christ returns, and he retains this power "only a little while."

If we say that the explanation in Rev 17:7-18 is given from the perspective of the first century, that pulls the sixth head back into the first century, i.e., before the 1260 days. But parallels with earlier chapters indicate that the sixth head must come after the 1260 days. Thus, it is an exegetical error to apply Rev 17:7-18 during the first century.

## Conclusion

Requiring that the "now" of Rev 17:8-9 be tied to the first century has the effect of creating a second series of world empires (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, secular Rome, spiritual Rome), over and above the one already present in Daniel (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, secular Rome, spiritual before the wound, during the wound, and after the wound). The two series overlap to a degree,

but also diverge significantly from each other.<sup>1</sup> It is neither safe nor necessary to separate Daniel from Revelation in this way. We must learn to see and appreciate the parallels which bind the two books together.

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<sup>1</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, "The Seven Heads of the Beast in Revelation 17," *Ministry*, December 2013, 16-19; Ekkehardt Mueller, "Interpreting the Beast of Revelation 17: A Suggestion," Biblical Research Institute Release 1 (Biblical Research Institute, 2005).