

“One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow,
but its mortal wound had been healed.”

Our relationship to the Lord through His Word defines who we are. It not only defines who we are as individuals, but also as a community and a church. The Book of Revelation, with all its amazing and perplexing visions of beauty and danger and confusion, have shown us how – and how not – to build communities around the Word and the doctrine we draw from it. The Heavenly Doctrines reveal to us these instructions and warnings.

The entire book of Revelation is a story of church history, an account of how churches rise and fall and specifically how the Christian Church has come to a close, told prophetically by John of Patmos. On another internal level, the Book of Revelation is about our own personal journey and struggle to become a church in microcosm, to approach the Lord in His Word and come into conjunction with Him.

Today we turn specifically to Chapter Thirteen of Revelation and the relevant material in *Apocalypse Revealed*. This story, describing a Beast of the Sea and a Beast of the Land and their efforts to conquer the world, is a warning for us about twisting the Word and celebrating our own power. It is also a warning about how the clergy and the laity interact and work together; the Beast of the Sea is an image of the laity, and the Beast of the Land is an image of the clergy.

We will consider these images today, like visitors walking past displays in a museum. Imagine the thick display glass, the small placards on stands in front of the glass. We walk past three displays, three windows, and each has a warning: the first reads “live a disjointed life”, the second reads “stay in our evils”, and the third reads “hurt people”. These are three terrible ideas, and they lurk within each of us. These are personal warnings, but they also serve as a warning to the church as-a-whole. Blessedly, there is a universal law described in the Heavenly Doctrines explaining that insofar as we shun evil loves, the Lord replaces those with good loves. (AC 5828, TCR 437) We can use these three warnings to find joy in our church with each other and join the Lord in His Holy Kingdom. Thus we have three scenes, three warnings to each of us, and three warnings to the church.

Our first scene is a well-known one: the great red dragon with the heading: “live a disjointed life”. Inside the display we see a beast with seven heads, seven crowns, and ten horns, a description that speaks to its terrible power. By the end of Chapter Twelve this dragon has been thrown out of heaven by Michael, and then failed to destroy the Woman Clothed with the Sun with her child as the earth swallowed the dragon’s flood. Now the dragon seems to summon two new beasts, one of the sea and one of the land, to resume the fight against the forces of good. Very often in the Heavenly Doctrines the dragon is described as the idea of faith alone, the notion that salvation comes from belief and enthusiasm apart from behavior and repentance. (AC 369, BE 54, TCR 343) More specifically, from AR 537, we get a collection of related ideas representing the greatest threat to our participation in the Lord’s church: 1) God is three persons; 2) the Lord Jesus Christ has two natures; 3) faith is and should be separate from charity; and 4) faith alone saves a person.

This is a complicated and dreadful collection of ideas, more than we can untangle here today, but it is all about attacking and subverting the 'functional' authority of the Word while preserving its 'official' value. By insisting on the first two ideas - that God has multiple persons and the Lord has two natures - Christianity in history separated and destroyed the idea that Jesus Christ is Jehovah, the Creator of the universe and the Savior of mankind. By insisting on the second two ideas - that faith and charity have no connection and that Christianity is nothing more than a passive trust in the Lord - Christianity has reduced the Word to a meaningless document of castigation and mystery.

The Heavenly Doctrines are not here describing our neighbors across the street or their sincere efforts to embody the love of Christ. The Heavenly Doctrines are describing the stance of institutional Christianity of the 18th Century, an official stance that remains largely unchanged today. Insofar as a church cannot see Jesus 'officially' as Jehovah and cannot see the Word 'officially' as the path of repentance and conjunction with the Lord, it is not a church according to the Heavenly Doctrines.

But what about us as individuals? How do criticisms of official statements of European churches hundreds of years ago relate to our spiritual struggles now? Draconic ideas are always with us and within our minds. Every time we resist obeying the Word, it is the dragon. Part of us wants to lead a disjointed life. Part of us wants to learn but not obey the truth.

We want to be spiritually proud of our learning and perspective and wisdom while keeping those ideas from changing what we do with our bodies and to our neighbors. We want a disjointed life where talking the talk does not interfere with walking the walk. The truth is, happiness and peace come only through putting good and truth together, and that means removing evil from our operating, behavioral lives. (HH 289).

More specifically in Chapters Twelve and Thirteen, this first scene is about our personal inclination to revere the Word but not listen to it. This brings us our second museum scene with the heading, "stay in our evils". Past the glass we can imagine a beast also with seven heads. This one looks mostly like leopard, though it has the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion. It looks like a leopard to symbolize confusing falsity and truth, much as the light and dark spots on a leopard confuse prey. It stands on feet like a bear because the literal sense of the Word is its foundation, and bears symbolize the literal sense, here twisted from ignorance and confusion. This monstrous creature has the mouth of a lion because of how powerful it is. The lion is all the reasoning supporting falsity drawn from a twisted idea of the Word, a power that can seem unstoppable like a lion (Dan 7:4-6). The descriptions of this beast's conquests and power shows how insatiable this idea of staying in our evil can be, taking over our whole lives if we let it.

It should remind us of the dragon because it is a version of the dragon. It also has seven heads, but one head has been wounded to death. As we watch the scene, the head is healed. This recovery symbolizes the fact that 'faith alone' as a doctrine is nowhere taught in the Word, but this error can be 'healed' if we simply believe nobody can obey the truths of the Word. Once we decide nobody can measure up, that none of the commands in the Word are

realistic or clear, the church can instead focus on enthusiasm and blind faith, and then the doctrine of 'faith alone' is alive and well.

This does not describe our honest struggles to understand the Word or our debates about how to live its commandments; no, this beast is the belief that we can value the Word without having to follow it. Like a useless but expensive gem locked in a box, the Beast of the Sea does not see the Word as the enemy but as the source of the beast's power and esteem.

Everyone sees authority in something. Nobody is master of themselves, and we each must choose whether to follow God or Mammon (Matt 6:24). We all strive to see authority in God's Word, and we all are tempted to see authority in Mammon: our own appetites and senses. The danger of the Beast of the Sea is the promise of having it both ways: combining the disjointed faith alone perspective of the dragon to our loyalty to the Word. How wonderful would it be if we could revere the Word without having to obey its truths? How peaceful would life be if we could rest secure in our love for the truth and our confidence that it could not possibly describe our lives. This is the Beast of the Sea. It is a corruption of the Word in its literal sense, it is the conviction that since nobody is certain what the Word says, it must say nothing of consequence. This is what it means to be a leopard with the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion, with seven heads healed and healthy.

Let's not forget about what it says about the church as well. The Beast of the Sea is an image of the laity, specifically the desire of the laity to be told by the priesthood that the church members are special, they are God's chosen, and they do not need to change. There is an implicit bargain being offered here to the priesthood: the laity will value the Word – and give authority to who preach from it – so long as the priesthood does not pester the laity with anything that upsets their exercise of hellish freedom. As long as the priests in the pulpit and classroom say nothing offensive or contrary to our human prudence and the mores of the day, the laity will be happy to attend church and consider the priesthood wise and respected.

And the Beast of the Land is the reply of the clergy. We now walk past the third and final scene. In our museum it has the heading, "hurt people". The beast within is perhaps more disturbing than terrifying. It is not described much beyond having two horns like a lamb and speaking like the dragon. The lamb horns show us that this beast's power comes from the Word and the idea of God, but the voice of the dragon shows us that this beast also preaches a disjointed life, a life of pride unbothered by humility, repentance, or change. (AR 595) It uses the traditional powers of a prophet to demand everyone worship an idol of the Beast of the Sea, and it desires to mark everyone with the sign of the beast, 666, and thus eradicate dissent and sincere pursuit of the Word.

Just as evil wants to value the Word without listening to or following it, evil also loves to punish those who differ or disagree. More specifically, the draconic idea of a disjointed life here means we demand people value our point of view and even obey it – but because it is our point of view, not because it is from the Word. This hatred of others will always flow from the previous idea that the Word doesn't specifically govern us. If we conclude the Word doesn't demand we obey the Word, then we will demand others obey us in its stead. Every time we think we personally are beyond reproach, are not guilty of our confirmed evils, those evils will

immediately prompt us to persecute those around us who 'obviously' disagree with our ideas enjoying the Divine seal of approval. If the Lord cannot disagree with our choices in life, how dare anyone else disagree? How dare anyone anywhere claim we should change if the Word allows us to wallow in our evils? Evil is insatiable, and absent our specific and daily obedience to the truths of the Word, our evils wish to overcome everyone and everything around us. (HH 559, TCR 405)

The Beast of the Land thus serves the Beast of the Sea, demanding all parts of our life worship our desire to stay in our evils. In our church, this would be clergy carefully avoiding any claims that the Lord is saddened by our evil decisions but castigating with virtual fire from heaven those who do see the command to change and repent.

This is not an image of heated doctrinal debate. No, this museum display shows damnation, the permission to hate others because we are sure they are not the neighbor, not worth listening to, and deserve nothing but sharp and perpetual persecution until they obey us. Any doctrinal stance can be taken by the Beast of the Land so long as it demands no meaningful change in ourselves and gives us an excuse to hate those around us.

Our third museum display concludes with the mark of the beast, also the mark of the man, symbolizing a united hellish person of both affection (the beast) and intelligence (the man). It is a mark on both forehead and hand to symbolize our conviction in both will and intellect, thought and deed, that the truths of the Word cannot lead our daily lives (AR 605). The number six refers to every truth united to good corrupted by faith alone, and its repetition shows us how totally the church within us can be overwhelmed by this terrible idea.

So what are we to make of these three museum displays? They are more than a description of spiritual events from hundreds of years ago. They are warnings from the Lord's mercy and love, a path to avoid every day personally and in our church. When we read this description of the dragon, we know that the Lord instead wants us to draw doctrine for life, Monday afternoon as much as Sunday morning, not lock it away as a mystery. (TCR 185) When we read of the Beast of the Sea, the Lord instead wants us to submit to the rules of the Word we see regardless of our personal preference or cultural message. When we read of the Beast of the Land, the Lord instead is asking us to revisit His Word daily in humility, and to rejoice when others read and struggle with us. The result will be a New Jerusalem: a church like a city with the Lord's radiant presence, a laity which values the Tree of Life for its healing leaves, and a priesthood atop its high walls with open gates beckoning all who desire to learn the truths to enter into the mysteries of faith.

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it. (Psalm 95:11)*

Amen.

Readings:

Revelation 13:1-18

AR 576