

“Hot Potato Texts: The Dragons of Revelation”

Revelation 12: 1-18
Aesop Fables (Introduction)
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“There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.”

We all know where those famous lines came from, right? *The Wizard of Oz* which was released over seventy years ago in 1939 and starred the amazing Judy Garland. *“There’s no place like home.”* We repeat that line at various times in our lives. Sometimes after a long trip. Sometimes following an extended hospital stay. Sometimes it’s adult children returning after years of absence from their childhood home. And when we say it we say as if there is a truth to it. It betrays the sense of yearning we feel in our souls. It exposes the longing we have for a place to belong and to feel safe.

“There’s no place like home.” Who would have known that to get to that simple truth that we would have had to travel through the most bizarre worlds? Who would have known that to get there we were going to have to travel with Dorothy on the yellow brick road? Who would have known that to arrive at the simple truth that “there is no place like home” we were going to have to battle flying monkeys and escape from vicious trees? Who would have known that we would need to take the journey with a brainless scarecrow, a scaredy-cat lion, and a heartless tin man? Who would have known that to finally arrive home Dorothy would have to go to battle with the Wicked Witch of the West?

I am preaching this five week series called Hot Potato Texts. You all know remember the game “Hot Potato.” The goal of the game was to pass the hot potato around the circle and when the music stopped to not be caught with the potato. So usually people passed it off as fast as they possibly could. No sense in letting it sit too long in your hands and burn you. It’s like the scripture texts we are dealing with. All of the texts are ones that most of us pass right over as quickly as we can. Last week we waded into Leviticus. Who wants to linger in a book that tells us what food we can eat and what food we can’t eat, who we can touch and when we can touch them, and how many times we have to wash before handling liturgical aids?

This week we are in Revelation. How many of you have ever read it completely through? How many of you try to avoid it at all possible? How many of you think it is bizarre talking about dragons and beasts, trumpets and angels? Most of treat it lot a hot potato. Open it and pass it on as quickly as possible. But, what if I asked you, “How many of you think that the *Wizard of Oz* is bizarre with its witches, flying monkeys, tin man, and munchkins.” I mean the *Wizard of Oz* is a little strange, but we accept that that’s the nature of fairy tales. *Alice in Wonderland* is just being released as well and I bet there will be millions of people going to see it despite all sorts of bizarre things. A review for it begins this way: *“Wonderland is an odd place. The land is filled with talking animals, disappearing cats, nursery-rhyme characters, hookah-smoking caterpillars and truly mind-altering mushrooms. Why, one would almost wonder whether this land makes any sense at all.”*

Welcome to the land of Revelation. A place that doesn’t seem to make any sense at all. Unless, of course, you lived in that time and you knew the myths and the great epic stories of the surrounding culture. You see, I can say to you “the wicked witch of the West” and most of you will immediately cringe and go, *“Oh, she was the bad, bad witch who was trying to keep*

Dorothy and her little dog, Toto, from getting home.” I can say “Darth Vader” and you will immediately think evil. I can say “Yoda” and you’ll think spiritual good.

In the Mediterranean world of Biblical times one of the great epic stories of Greek culture was the story of how the divine god, Apollo, had been born to Zeus. The dragon, Python, sought to kill the divine Apollo. So his mother, Leto, fled and hid Apollo away until he was older. Eventually Apollo returned to Delphi where he had been born and ended up killing the dragon. The story is a common mythological story. It is the story of the forces of darkness against the forces of light. It is the Greek version of good vs. evil. But, when this story was told during that time it was assumed that the forces of good were the Roman emperors and the forces of darkness were anything that threatened their well-ordered world. The Roman emperors were considered divine and their children who were going to inherit the throne were called Sons of God. The mythological battle between good and evil was assumed to be a battle between the peace and security of Roman society against the internal and external threats to Roman society.

What makes Revelation so interesting is that the author, John of Patmos, uses the same basic story of good versus evil, but he changes the associations with the main characters. Leto, the mother of Apollos is now Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the whole people of God. Apollos who slays the dragon is replaced by the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Most striking of all, the evil dragon actually becomes the Roman empire itself which is a complete reversal of how the story was interpreted.

We have the same story. It is a story of good versus evil. It is a story of how the forces of darkness are defeated by the forces of light. But, John does two things. He interprets the story through the life of Jesus Christ and says, “It’s not the Romans who will slay the dragon. It is the risen Jesus Christ who will slay the dragon and, guess what Romans, the dragon is you.” Those were fighting words. The second thing that John does is to put this story in the context of the ultimate end of history. His concern is less about the reign of Jesus Christ over one particular Roman emperor or one specific dynasty. The way the story is told in Revelation this story of the battle between good and evil is being fought out in the cosmic order. It’s not just the end of one empire. It’s actually the ushering in of the final consummation of history when peace and justice will reign forever.

It may be a convoluted and twisty way to get there. Dragons and angels, beasts and sun gods devouring each other, fighting sometimes in the heavens, sometimes on earth. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to us. Couldn’t there be an easier way to get the message across that someday we’ll all be home in God’s kingdom? Couldn’t there be a clearer way to say someday the world will wake up to another day of love, peace will be the top headline, and compassion will speak louder than money.

Couldn’t there be an easier way to let us know that the final chapter of our history is going to be about the final consummation of God’s kingdom. Why did John have to make it so complicated with dragons and beasts and sun gods? Why didn’t he make it simple so we could understand it? Why didn’t he put it in everyday language?

All he had to do was tell us about a girl in the land of Oz who was following a yellow brick road. If he had just told his story using munchkins and flying monkeys then we would have gotten the story perfectly. If only he replaced the dragons with the Wicked Witch of the West the whole message would have been abundantly clear. And why use angels? Why not use a scarecrow, a tin man, and a cowardly lion? That we would have understood.

After a long battle with the witch and flying monkeys and aided by her little angels, the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion Dorothy brings the point home, "*There's no place like home.*"

John of Patmos could have been a Hollywood producer. The characters are different but the story is the same. After a long battle between the dragon and the Messiah and his angels, John finally brings the story back to Kansas and declares, "*There's no place like God's home. There's no place like the love, and peace, and justice of God's kingdom.*"

"Somewhere over the rainbow

Way up high,

There's a land that I heard of

Once in a lullaby." *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*