

Commentary on the Revelation

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 - 1) The conflict of the ages, 12:1-17

The dragon, the woman, and the child the dragon sought to destroy is a narrative as old as Genesis 3:15, the conflict between “the seed of the serpent” and “the seed of the woman.” The “serpent” failed to destroy the “seed of the woman,” and until the great judgment of the serpent and his minions who is now trying to destroy the “women,” “true Israel,” the believers in every century.

- 2) The beast out of the sea, 13:1-10

What is found in this chapter is a delineation of the means the “Red Dragon” will employ to wage an insidious war against the offspring of the woman through the ages and until their final defeat. Two entities, one governmental and the other religious, compose authorities in opposition to Christ’s kingdom.

The phrase, “I saw” indicates a second vision in the series of seven (12:1-15:4). What is stated in these verses is an expansion of 12:13-17, explaining the nature of the persecution in greater detail. Thus, what the “red dragon” does in chapter 12, he executes through his servants in chapter 13. The “beast” is identified by Paul as the “Man of Lawlessness” (II Thess. 2:3) and John as the “Anti-Christ” (I John 2:18). In intertestamental history, Antiochus Epiphanes IV would be another example, as is Rome in the first century, of such a “beast.” John tells us that there are many Anti-Christ-figures that emerge through time, but in the very end of times what the many prefigure will come.

The two beasts in this chapter, combined with the one who grants them authority, Satan, parrots the divine trinity. Throughout these chapters the devil emulates the divine, being the master deceiver.

a) The origin and authority of the beast, vv. 1-2

“The sea,” being unruly, is often a picture of evil, particularly evil kingdoms, and thus indicating his origin and nature (see 12:3; 17:3, 8). “Horns” suggest power, “heads” evil epitomized or complete, and “diadems” a claim to royalty. Clearly this is a parody on Christ (5:6), the first of many; he is a fake deliverer! His names and titles are false claims to deity.

John takes the four beasts of Daniel 7:4-6 and creates one figure. In the vision, the beast represents political power and thus is to be interpreted as all that is opposed to God in the world. The beast then is the state that opposes and persecutes the saints. Says Mounce, “The beast has always been, and will be in a final

intensified manifestation, the deification of secular power (251).”

The beast’s authority to act is delegated to him by Satan and he becomes the incarnation of him (again a parody on Christ [5:6]). Historic examples of “beastly” potentates would be Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (Dan 4, 5) though there have been many others since. The chapter speaks little of the dragon, Satan, because his activities are through proxies such as the “beast.” In the time of the seven churches, it was the Roman Empire and its Caesars that claimed divine status and mandated worship.

b) The attraction of the beast, vv. 3-4

The beast is a mimic of Christ. He received a fatal wound, but recovered (a death and resurrection, the latter through the power of Satan). Clearly this tells us that God allows the devil to empower his agents. The phrase “as slain” is almost identical to “standing as slain,” a reference to Christ (5:6). The parody is stunning (Beale, 271).

Both were slain and raised

Both have followers with names on their foreheads (13:16, 14:1)

Both have expansive authority (5:9, 13:7)

Both have horns (5:6, 13:1)

Both receive worldwide worship (5:8-14, 13:4, 8)

Both have a final coming, one to reign and the other to destruction (17:7-18)

There was a persistent myth in the first century that the “beast” may have been

Emperor Nero. Some Christians seemed to believe that Nero (54-68) would be resurrected at some future time and inflict greater evil. It does not seem to be credible. Earlier Caligula (38-41) ordered statues of himself to be set up in synagogues as well as the temple in Jerusalem. Roman emperors and subsequent potentates were only anticipators, shadows of one to come.

c) The activities of the beast, vv. 5-8

What we have here is an expansion of vv. 1-4.

(1) Stated, vv. 5-7

The word “authority” occurs twice in these verses (5, 7) highlighting the function of the beast, which encompasses deceptive power. “Arrogant words and boasting” reminds one of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 7:8) and his subsequent reduction to a beast of the field. However, his power is limited in duration (v. 5) and in effect (v. 8). The “forty-two months” is most like symbolic of the entire inter-advent period.

It is interesting that John chooses the passive voice to describe the beast’s activities, meaning that God allows his actions to transpire for a greater purpose that becomes evident only later. Says Stott, “John wants his little handful of persecuted Christians [2-3] to see that the things that matter is the sovereignty of God, not the power of evil. When man’s name is written in the book of life, he will not be forgotten. His place is secure (169).”

(2) Realized, v. 8

The consequence of the beast's deceptive abilities is that he will deceive unbelievers, those without the sealing of God (7:1-3), whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life (17:8).

d. The application to the saints, vv. 9-10

These verses state a recurrent theme in the address to the churches (2:7, 17; 3:6, 13, 22). The "if" is a first-class condition in the original language indicating that John is stating a fact. It may be translated this way: "Since you have ears to hear (meaning you are redeemed, meaning they have the seal of God's protective mercies), listen." Here is a warning addressed to the churches; beware. This suggests that the events he is describing have relevance to the seven churches as well as the final times.

Though the people of God have the protective seal of God (7:1-3), it does not necessarily exempt them from death, persecution, even martyrdom (remember Antipas!). The seal is a promise of our final redemption; the seal is the ground of persevering courage in the midst of difficulties. John is exhorting the saints in the seven churches to resist compromise with its pagan culture.

c. The beast out of the earth, 13:11-18

The phrase "and I saw" indicates that a new section commences, the third in the series of seven visions. The subject is the same as in vv. 1-8 though the perspective changes to the state's religious affiliate, the false church or false prophet (16:13, 19:20). Some have concluded that the two beasts are a parody on the two witnesses of God (11:13-14); other that they join Satan as a parody on the divine Trinity.

1) The appearance of the beast. v. 11

This beast is a symbol of evil. “Horns” suggest power and the reference to a lamb is a mimic of the true Lamb, Jesus Christ. His authority, like the first beast, is derived the “Dragon” or Satan. Of interest is the fact that he does not seek glory for himself but works to glorify the first beast (in that sense he is a mimic of the Holy Spirit).

2) The activities of the beast, vv. 12-17

a) The power behind his deception, vv. 12-13

The function of the second beast is to cause the veneration of the first beast (vv. 14-15). In the first-century world, the image of the Caesar (in this instance, some suggest that it is likely Domitian [depending on the dating of the book]) who was becoming an object of required worship. As the head of the empire, he was perceived as a redeemer-figure. The idolatry of the day supported the state, the two very much intertwined. The welfare of the state was integrally perceived as related to pagan right temple-worship. To reject such idolatrous religious practices was perceived as incurring the wrath of the gods that protected the state. We know, for example, that Ephesus was the center of the cult of emperor worship, marked by the presence of a huge statue to Domitian. People were expected to have altars outside their homes in reverence to the gods. The parallels with the experiences of Daniel account for the many references to the book in the Revelation to Daniel’s book.

b) The deceitfulness, vv. 13-15

The ability to work miracles is not restricted to the power of God; as indicated above, it can be

delegated as is the case here (Deut.13:1-3) and illustrated by Pharaoh's magician (Exod. 7:9-12). This beast causes life to emerge from the image of the first beast buttressing the claim to deity. We have a talking "serpent" in Genesis 3 that started the whole mess; here we have a talking statue!! The two are connected! Also, Nebuchadnezzar's massive golden image (Dan. 3:1-7, in Daniel the statue remains lifeless, here it does not).

c) The consequences, vv. 16-17

Social status and material welfare depended upon affiliation with cultic practices. Existence in Asia Minor culture depended upon the approval of the state that was intrinsically related to worship of the state's deities. Clearly, the seven churches were not spared the ravage of civil and religious disobedience.

In short, the "mark of the beast" (v. 17) symbolizes unqualified allegiance to the demands of the state, the imperial cult of that day ("forehead" speaks of mental allegiance, "righthand" of ability to work). It is referenced five times in the book, each occurrence in connection with worship (14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Allegiance was apparently, at times, required to enter into commerce ("he causes all" [v.16], "no one should be able to buy or sell" [v. 17]) as he will in the last of the Last Days!

3) The exhortation, v. 18

What John seems to be saying is that wisdom is found in the realization that the opponents of the churches are limited in power and blighted in character; they simply will not have the last say. The exhortation is the same as found in vv. 9-10, but

the metaphor changes from ear to thought, the numerical representation of a name required skill to interpret. John is stating that the churches should resist compromise, that what appears to be real and true, evidenced even by significant miracles, may not be at all. Appearances can be deceiving! The need in the churches is for spiritual discernment.

Here is the only occurrence of “666” in the Bible. Six is the number of incompleteness and triple sixes may be a reference to the false Trinity. It seems that the number represents the person who is the political-beast figure. Assigning numbers to letters in the alphabet is called “gematria.” If the words “beast” and “Nero Caesar” are transliterated into Hebrew letters and the letters are assigned value from 1 to 22, the number of letters in the alphabet, the sum comes to “666.” If John is referencing Nero, it has relevance to the dating of the book, but he could be using the number typologically of those who would be like him through history and the great final one at the end of time.

If the number refers simply to mankind, Stott writes, “John will then be saying that unregenerate man is persistently evil. He bears the mark of the beast in all he does. Civilization without Christ is necessarily under the dominion of the evil one (174).”

Summary:

First Beast	Second Beast
Appearance: animal-like, v. 2 (leopard, bear, lion)	Appearance: animal-like, v. 11 (lamb)

Source: the sea, v. 4	Source: the earth, v. 11
Power: political, v. 2, 7	Power: religious, v. 12
Authority: Dragon, v. 9	Authority: the first beast, v.12
Demands: worship, vv. 4, 8	Demands: worship, v. 12
Character: blasphemous, vv. 1, 5, 6	Character: Blasphemous, v. 12
Rule: unbelievers, war vv. 3, 7, 8	Rule: Unbelievers, vv. 16, 17
Appeal: power, vv. 2, 4; war, v.7 a healing, v. 4	Appeal: miracles, vv. 13, 17
Motive: deception, vv. 3, 4	Motive: deception, v. 14
Response: listen, persevere, v. 10	Response: wisdom, v. 18

Applications

1. The very nature of Satan is corruption personified; he is a false accuser, deceiver, and master psychologist. He mimics all that is true with a veneer of apparent truth, but it is all a cover up. He wants the world to believe a lie about the nature of reality and truth. While He could act alone, he has accomplices (fallen angels like himself called demon minions that include deluded people, institutions, and systems). He wants us to believe lies and one of the prominent purveyors is our media sources that explain the meaning of life, that we deserve much (all for a financial price), and that the essence of living is the pursuit of pleasure, even at the expense of the dignity and rights of others. Can you see any of this in the American culture, the world of value in which you live? What are you doing to resist what is said to be truth, yet are only lies?
2. It is clear in our passage that the “beast out of the sea” is symbolic of political structures and governments that the devil controls for his purposes. This can readily be observed in the actions of governments like Iran, Libya, China, North Korea, and Syria, but does it also exist in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, countries that are not imprisoning those of Christian profession and where the churches have legal sanction? In what ways are the “so-called enlightened countries” oppressive? We find ourselves in a love-hate relationship with such countries because they allow freedom of

religion, but they often strive to be free of it. How are we to conduct our lives and make godly choices in our governmental structure? Does this mean that our country was really never a Christian country?

3. While we despair of countries that persecute Christians overtly and subversively, is there any comfort to be derived from the fact that the Bible clearly teaches that God is expressing His absolute will in allowing tyrants political office controlling the lives of millions of people. While we are to pray for our governments, for those who rule over us, is our government our true refuge and hope? Do you believe that God has guaranteed you a comfort-filled passage into His presence through a world without pain and stress? What God wants us to know is that we live in a fallen world, but correctly it is not our true refuge; at best it can be a worthy shadow but that is all. We have been commanded to be obedient citizens, to prosper the countries we live in, to labor for its improvement, but is this all that needs to be said to gain a realistic picture of life and purpose? Are we to live in a fantasy world dulling our senses with endless entertainment devices? Is this our only medicine for our souls?
4. What is our duty in a fallen world that is truly not our friend, one that does not have our best interests in mind? In a troubled world that is hostile to the God of the Bible, welcoming other gods, what are we to do? The answer is that we are to persevere in what we know is true, right, and honoring to God. Compromise is not an option with the gods of this world. The truest mark of Christian profession is dutiful endurance of hardship and testing; it is the clearest evidence of the nature and embrace of our convictions. Are you an overcomer or simply overwhelmed? Did not Jesus say, "In this world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world?" Are you looking up or are you looking down? Our hope is in the one who conquered death, now reigns as the triumphant king, and who will someday extend His kingdom over all the earth. Does He now reign in the kingdom of your life?
5. Not only are governments controlled by evil forces, the symbolical first beast, there is a second "beast." This one is religious error, false teachings. In John's day, it was reflected in pagan idolatry with its panoply of deities that promised protection, fertility, and health. Today, little has changed in that regard. Many churches, even

traditional conservative ones, have abandoned the gospel for what is often considered a more relevant, helpful one. Do you know churches that have simply turned their eyes from the true gospel to one of self-help, self-management techniques, to maintain the semblance of Christian profession? If Jesus is not proclaimed from our pulpits as the one who died for us, rose for us conquering death, reigns triumphantly for us, and will one day come for us, it is not the biblical Christ you hear about? If the churches promise less, or even more, than Jesus did, it is false religion? Do you attend a church where Jesus crucified and raised in not the focal point? Do you attend a church that teaches living wisely is the essence of Christian faith, where earth is more discussed than the one who inhabits heaven?

6. There is a saying that “all that glitters is not gold.” This is clearly the message of the Revelation. There is a true Trinity of God and there is a false one consisting of the devil and the two “beasts.” The second beast, false religion, is a wing of the first beast, the state. It functions in the role of the Holy Spirit to bring glory to the first beast, the false Christ. The state is not our savior; it is a false redeemer. Nietzsche wrote two centuries ago of the supremacy of the state and Hitler attempted it in the century past. Others in our past have sought to make religion a servant of the state and the state the redeemer of the people; still others will come if the Lord does not. Have you come to grips that this world is not really real; it is real but it is only a shadow of what realness is? In its best of times, it points to greater things than itself; in the worst of times, it is a deceiver. Remember the old hymn: “This world is not my home; I am just a passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue...”
7. Our chapter ends with an explanation of true wisdom. This is captured by John in the symbolism of the number six; it is the number of mankind depicting incompleteness and insufficiency. Mankind has sought to bring a kingdom about without Christ from Gen 10, the Tower of Babel, and every time has failed. This tells me that our hope should not be in systems and programs (though they are needed to manage the chaos). In a fallen world structure has a negative or preventative purpose; it is to forestall evil and its effects though it has often proven to be contrary to its intended purposes. Is your hope in people to act wisely and prudently on your behalf? Is

that the best vehicle for securing hope and peace in a troubled world?