

Revelation Ch. 13: The Beasts

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We have been introduced to the root cause of the spiritual conflict between good and evil, the devil (12:9), whose influence is not limited to the first century, but will exist until the end of time. It is the purpose of this chapter to introduce the rise of the Roman Empire as Satan's instrument in the persecution of God's people, and agent of destruction in the fall of Jerusalem (17:17).

Verse 1

Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name.

According to the NASB, it is not John that stood on the sand of the sea, but the dragon (12:17). This is then a picture of the dragon, Satan, calling the beast out of the sea. Satan is a spiritual being, and therefore stands on the sand of the sea, while the beast arises from the mass of humanity (cf. 17:15). The beast, like the dragon, has seven heads and ten horns (12:3), representing its authority and power. The heads are later identified with kings (17:10) and horns with subjugate kings (17:12). It is a world empire.

It will become apparent from the following verses that the beast is the Roman Empire, and so the blasphemous name on the heads of the beast symbolizes the exaltation of the Caesars as gods (17:3; cf. Jn. 10:33; Acts 12:22-23; 14:11-13). Not only did the people exalt them to this status, but the emperors of Rome thought of themselves in the same way (Dan. 7:8, 25; cf. Dan. 11:36-38).

Verse 2

Now the beast which I saw was like a leopard, his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. The dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority.

A comparison with the Book of Daniel shows that a beast was symbolic of a kingdom or world empire. The only kingdom or world empire prominent at the time Revelation was written was the Roman Empire, and so this must be the identity of the sea beast. The following is evidence from two visions of Daniel.

Daniel 2 – The Great Statue

In this vision, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, dreams of a great statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay (Dan. 2:32). The statue is struck on its feet and is broken to pieces (Dan. 2:34, 35). Daniel interprets the dream as follows:

- 1) Head of gold – Symbolizes the kingdom of Babylon (Dan. 2:38; 606 – 539 BC).
- 2) Chest and arms of silver – Symbolizes another kingdom inferior to Babylon (Dan. 2:39). The kingdom that would arise after Babylon was the Medo-Persian Empire (539 – 331 BC).
- 3) Thighs of bronze – Symbolizes a third kingdom that would rule over all the earth (Dan. 2:39). The kingdom that arose after the Medo-Persian Empire was the Greek Empire (331 – 31 BC).
- 4) Legs of iron and feet of iron and clay – Symbolizes a fourth kingdom as strong as iron, and one that would crush all others (Dan. 2:40). Though strong, it was to be divided and fragile (Dan. 2:41, 42). This kingdom is the Roman Empire (31 BC – 476 AD).

After describing the statue as representing these four kingdoms, Daniel then declares another kingdom that would be setup by God in the days of the fourth kingdom, one that shall stand forever (Dan. 2:44). This kingdom is the church (cf. Mk. 1:15; 9:1; Lk. 1:30-33; Col. 1:13; Rev. 12:10), established during the rule of Rome (Lk. 3:1; c. 30 AD). It consumes all other kingdoms through the message of Christ, in which men subject themselves to His rule (2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 3:15; Rev. 19:16).

Daniel 7 – The Four Beasts

In this vision, Daniel sees four great beasts, described as four kingdoms (Dan. 7:17, 23). As with the beast of Revelation, each of them comes up from the sea (Dan. 7:3). The first is like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth is described as dreadful and terrible. Like the statue, this vision ends with the everlasting kingdom of God (Dan. 7:14, 27; cf. Dan. 2:44).

- 1) The lion with eagles wings – Symbolizes the kingdom of Babylon that was a devouring lion (Dan. 7:4; Jer. 4:7, 13; Ezek. 17; cf. Joel 1:6). The wings would be plucked off by the Medes and Persians (Jer. 51:11; Dan. 5:28).
- 2) The bear – Symbolizes the Medo-Persian Empire that would conquer Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt to become the next world power (three ribs?). It would be raised up on one side, as the Persians overshadowed the Medes (Dan. 7:5; 8:3, 20). These would give way to the Greek Empire (Dan. 10:20).
- 3) The leopard – Symbolizes the Greeks that would rapidly take over the world through Alexander, and then divide into four parts after his death (Dan. 7:6; 8:8, 21, 22; 11:2-4).
- 4) The dreadful beast – Symbolizes the Roman Empire that would devour and trample all others (Dan. 7:7). It started out as a republic (509 BC) and then transitioned into a world empire (31 BC). The ten kings (cf. Dan. 2:41, 42), may represent the ruling power of the consuls, while the specific three kings that are subdued (Dan. 7:8, 24) may represent the transition to an empire, as it went from the republic, to triumvirate (rule of three), to the solitary rule of an emperor. It was the Roman emperors who directed persecution toward the people of God (Dan. 7:8, 25; Rev. 13:7; 17:14; 19:19).

The Roman Empire can be described as dreadful and terrible, and a composite of the preceding three beasts described by Daniel (Dan. 7:7). Rome had the power and might of all these combined, strong as iron and able to crush all adversaries (Dan. 2:40). And it was Rome that conquered the world as a leopard (6:2; cf. Hab. 1:8), crushed smaller kingdoms like a bear, and devoured its enemies like a lion (cf. Joel 1:6).

Based on these passages, it is reasonable to conclude that the sea beast here is the same as the fourth kingdom in both Daniel 2 and Daniel 7, the Roman Empire.

Verse 3

And I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. And all the world marveled and followed the beast.

This represents a death blow given to one of the heads (kings, 17:10) of the beast from which it recovered. The Roman Republic transitioned to an empire as the result of the conquests and popularity of Julius Caesar. In 48 BC, he was given essentially all the power of an emperor short of the title itself (Ogden, p. 76). In 44 BC, he was proclaimed dictator for life, however, shortly thereafter, he was assassinated by Senators seeking to restore the Republic.

In 31 BC, Caesar's grand-nephew Octavian defeated Mark Antony in battle and arose as sole ruler of Rome. In 27 BC, he was proclaimed the first official emperor as Augustus Caesar. It was Augustus that brought Rome to its full power, which thrived under his rule.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the wounded head represents the progress of the empire halted in the death of Julius Caesar, and the healed wound pictures the new life given it by Augustus.

Verse 4

So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?"

The Roman Empire was a world power worshiped as Dea Roma, as its emperors were also worshiped (Ferguson, pp. 199-212; Gentry, pp. 264-276; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*). Most people asserted it to be invincible. When King Agrippa addressed the revolting Jews, he said:

Will you not carefully reflect upon the Roman Empire? Will you not estimate your own weakness? Hath not your army been often beaten even by your neighboring nations, while the power of the Romans is invincible in all parts of the habitable earth?
(Josephus, *Wars* 2.16.4)

Those who worshiped the beast were really worshiping the dragon, since it was he who gave the beast its rise to power. While God used the wicked empire for His purpose (11:15; 17:17; cf. Isa. 10:5-7), it was Satan that was instrumental in bringing it forth and provided the wicked influence (1 Jn. 3:8).

Verses 5-6

And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven.

The mouth of the empire is most naturally its emperor (cf. Dan. 7:8; 11:36). The emperor at this time, as shown in the introductory material, was Nero (54 – 68 AD), who, like many of the emperors, thought of himself as a god (Ogden, p. 283). Ferguson states regarding the imperial cult:

All of the first-century emperors equally favored the cult of the dead emperor. Tiberius and Claudius did not encourage the marks of adoration; Vespasian, although skeptical about divine honors, introduced imperial cult into the west; but Caligula, Nero, and Domitian permitted or even provoked them. (p. 209).

It was Nero who launched the first Roman persecution of Christians in 64 AD. He fits the picture better than none other as one who spoke against God (calling himself a god) and His tabernacle (the church). The 42 months could refer to the period of Christian persecution (13:7; cf. Dan. 7:25), or to the war with the Jews, as it does elsewhere (11:2; cf. 11:3; 12:5, 14). Both were periods of trial and tribulation that coincided with each other. The persecution of Christians started in November 64 AD, and ended, at the latest, with the death of Nero in June 68 AD. The duration of the war from its beginning to the fall of Jerusalem, lasted from March 67 AD to September 70 AD.

Verses 7-8

It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him,

whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

Regardless of the application of the 42 months, this war with the saints is the persecution of Christians (cf. Matt. 24:9). The rule of Nero is the only period in the first century with documented proof of persecution directed at Christians (see background notes; Gentry, pp. 285-289; Ogden, pp. 409-419). Of this persecution, in which the Christians were blamed for burning Rome, the Roman historian Tacitus (c. 109 AD) stated:

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of wild beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. (Annals XV.44)

All who dwell on the earth will worship him except Christians (Phi. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). This looks beyond the war, and is a general picture of worldwide allegiance to Rome, while the loyalty of Christians was to One higher (cf. Acts 4:19). It sets the stage for future conflicts between the people of God and the empire. Persecution brought upon God's people by those opposed to His message will continue for all ages to come, through which Christians can look to His word, and each other, for hope and comfort (cf. Rom. 8:18, 28; 1 Thes. 4:17, 18; 2 Tim. 3:12; Heb. 4:16; 1 Pet. 4:16).

It was God's eternal purpose that the Lamb be slain for the sins of mankind, so that all who obey Him can be found in the Book of Life (17:8; cf. Gen. 3:15; Matt. 25:34; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:18-21).

Verses 9-10

If anyone has an ear, let him hear. He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and faith of the saints.

In describing the events of this terrible period in time, God never forgets to give words of encouragement to His people (2:10, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 6:11; 14:12, 13; 16:15; 18:20; 19:9; 21:7). This is assurance that we reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7), and that those who war against God and His people will have their reward (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; Heb. 10:30; Rev. 16:6; 18:6;

20:12). Jesus said the same thing to Peter in the garden (Matt. 26:52). In June 68 AD, the great persecutor Nero committed suicide.

Verses 11-12

Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed.

This beast comes out of the earth, perhaps to symbolize its formation being contingent upon the sea beast rising. It should also be noted that the four beasts of Daniel are said to arise out of both the sea and the earth (Dan. 7:3, 17). Its appearance was seemingly harmless, having two horns like a lamb. It is this seemingly innocent nature from which this beast draws its power. Though it appeared gentle and harmless, it spoke the words of the devil. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15; cf. Acts 20:29) and is later described as the false prophet (16:13; 19:20).

The description of this beast ties in with the problems described earlier in the book. The Christians in Asia Minor were contending with false teachers, and as a result, some were departing from the faith. While Ephesus showed that it was strongly opposing error (2:2), churches like Pergamos and Thyatira were being seduced by teachings that seemed harmless, perhaps even good for Christianity (2:14, 20).

The earth beast is a symbol of the pagan religions upheld by the general populace, which included worship to Rome and its emperors. Although some of the Roman emperors demanded worship, it was the imperial cult that promoted worship more so than the rulers themselves. Note that it is the earth beast that is portrayed as demanding the worship to the sea beast.

Verses 13-14

He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived.

These cannot be legitimate signs like those of the two witnesses (cf. 11:3-6), for they are deceptive (16:14; 19:20). They are mere magic tricks as we have seen elsewhere in the Scriptures (Ex. 7-8; Acts 8:9-10; cf. Matt. 24:24; 2 Thes. 2:9; 1 Tim. 4:1; Ferguson, pp. 227-234). Temples and images to emperors were common place during this time (Ferguson, pp. 211-212).

The actions of the earth beast are rooted in the first century (cf. 1:1), and should not be confused and applied to some individual Antichrist that will appear at the end of time. The Bible does not teach of a personal Antichrist that will arise, but of the spirit of antichrist, which includes all teachings and people that are against Christ. Such teachings and people were already prevalent in the first century (1 Jn. 2:18; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7). In this sense, the beast is *an* antichrist, but not *the* Antichrist.

Because of similarities, some connect the identity of the “man of sin” (2 Thes. 2:3-12) with the beast. If he is the same as the beast, then his identity has been here interpreted. If something different, we do know that he is a (seemingly) religious force associated with the “falling away” (2 Thes. 2:3, 4) and that he represents something that was already at work in the first century (2 Thes. 2:7). For further discussion of the possibilities, please refer to Jackson (pp. 121-133; also http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/read/a_study_of_pauls_man_of_sin), and Moyer

(<http://www.bible.ca/ef/expository-2-thessalonians-2-1-12.htm>).

Verse 15-17

He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

This symbolizes the methods used by the imperial cult to enforce emperor worship and allegiance to Rome. Whether an order from the emperor was given or not, they spoke as if it was an official edict from Rome, that all men must show their loyalty by acknowledging Caesar as a god (Ogden, p. 286). A Roman governor by the name of Pliny wrote the following to the emperor Trajan (c. 112 AD), quoted from Ferguson (p. 594):

It is my custom, lord emperor, to refer to you all questions whereof I am in doubt...In investigations of Christians I have never taken part; hence I do not know what is the crime usually punished or investigated, or what allowances are made...Meantime this is the course I have taken with those who were accused before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution; for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished...As for those who said that they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into court for the purpose together with the images of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ – things which (so it is said) those who are really Christians cannot be made to do.

To refuse such worship to the gods and the emperor meant you were an atheist (Ferguson, p. 595), and persecution and hard times followed, represented as being unable to buy or sell, which became common practice toward the end of the first century (Ogden, p. 287).

Often pressure from the crowds provoked persecution, while the authorities tried to get Christians to conform outwardly so as to avoid the death penalty. Thus times of economic or political disaster when someone was needed on whom to place the blame were particularly bad times for Christians. (Ferguson, p. 606)

Though some people in those days were actually marked (Roper, p. 65), the mark here is not literal, but simply a symbol of one's loyalty, either to God (7:3; 14:1; 22:4; cf. Gal. 6:17) or to the beast. Just as the 144,000 were protected by the seal of God, so also would those submitting to the beast be (seemingly) protected by the empire.

Notice that God expects full devotion (forehead only; Matt. 22:37; Rom. 6:16-17; 12:1) while the beast accepts any type of service, whether it's willingly (forehead), or forced or half-hearted (right hand). Doubtless there were those who seemed like they were servants of God, but secretly had the mark of the beast on their right hands. Likewise, the name of the beast would be more apparent than the number. Regarding such service, notice what Ferguson says of the empire under Decius (c. 250 AD):

The situation changed in 250 when Decius declared a *supplicatio* in which he called upon all the residents of the empire to sacrifice to the gods. Machinery was set up to enforce the decree whereby each person who complied received a *libellus* or certificate from the official before whom he performed the sacrifice. Christianity was now legally proscribed: those who failed to comply were imprisoned and tortured, some killed. (p. 606)

Though this mark is specific to the Roman Empire, everyone has a mark shown by the way they live. Some have the seal of God (Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:19; cf. 1 Jn. 1:7), and others the mark of the devil (cf. Matt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13; Jn. 8:44).

Verse 18

Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.

This may be one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, discussing the infamous number 666. It should be kept in mind that the number belongs to the beast, the Roman Empire, and the beast to the first century.

The purpose for mentioning this number was not to trick anybody, but to emphasize that one who has wisdom will be able to identify those who seem to be Christians, but really have secret allegiance to the empire (13:15-17). It would be important for those Christians not to associate with such people as it would likely weaken their own faith (cf. Rev. 2:20).

The name of the beast is most logically the name of its present ruler, Nero Caesar, who led the first, and perhaps the most brutal persecution against Christians (13:7, 8). All future persecuting emperors would bear this number because they followed his lead, and Christians were to recognize that this first persecution would not be the last. Please see the notes titled “The Number of The Beast” for a more detailed discussion.

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