

## WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

### THE BEAST FROM THE SEA: 13:1-10

The relationship of the beast to the dragon is immediately apparent in that both have seven heads and ten horns, though in the case of the beast it is the horns that are crowned instead of the heads. This difference is not highly significant, however, since both the heads and the horns likely represent political powers (17:9, 12). The beast arose from the sea, a metaphor that later seems to bear the meaning of the nations of the world (17:1, 15; cf. Isa. 57:20), though some interpreters point out that in the ancient mythologies, the sea represents the abyss of chaos.

The description of the beast is a composite of the four beasts in Daniel's vision (Da. 7), and as such, it had characteristics of a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a ten-horned monster.<sup>1</sup> The beast displays the concentrated character of the totalitarian world empires. The power behind the beast was Satan.

### The Beast as Anti-Christ

There seems to be a deliberate parallel between the beast and the Revelation's description of Christ:

- ...Both have diadems (13:1; 19:12)
- ...Both have representative names (13:1; 19:11, 12, 16)
- ...Both are worshiped (13:4, 14-15; 5:12-13, etc.)
- ...Both are wounded but live (13:3, 12, 14; 1:18; 4:6)
- ...Both have power, a throne, and authority (13:2; 5:12-13; 12:5, 10)

The description of the beast also contains striking parallelisms with other biblical passages. Paul's description of a coming man of lawlessness, who will do the work of Satan and who will exalt himself against God (2 Th. 2:3-4, 8-12), as well as Daniel's vision of



*Composite figures are well-known iconic expressions in ancient art, capturing the features of intelligence, speed, and power. This statue of an Assyrian guardian figure with the body of a bull, wings of an eagle, and head of a man is a good example.*

(The Metropolitan, New York)

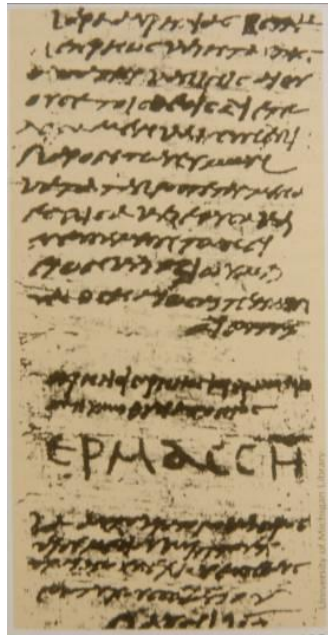
<sup>1</sup> A good deal of discussion has accompanied the interpretation of the four beasts in Daniel 7. It would be too much to attempt to solve the enigmas of both Daniel and the Apocalypse here, so let it suffice to merely list the two major sequential interpretations:

LION	Babylon	Babylon
BEAR	Media	Medo-Persia
LEOPARD	Persia	Greece
MONSTER	Greece	Rome

For the sequence ending with Greece, see L. Hartman and A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 212-214. For the sequence ending with Rome, see J. Baldwin, *Daniel [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978), pp. 161-162.

the little horn (Da. 7:8, 11, 21-22, 24-26) are obvious precedents for John's description of the beast. While the actual title "anti-Christ" does not appear in the Book of Revelation (it comes from 1 Jn. 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7), the personified forces of evil that John describes are surely worthy of the name. Unprecedented persecution will be leveled against God's people (cf. Mk. 13:14-23; Mt. 24:15-25), and such persecution calls for tenacious faithfulness on the part of God's saints.

### The Recurring Pattern of the Beast

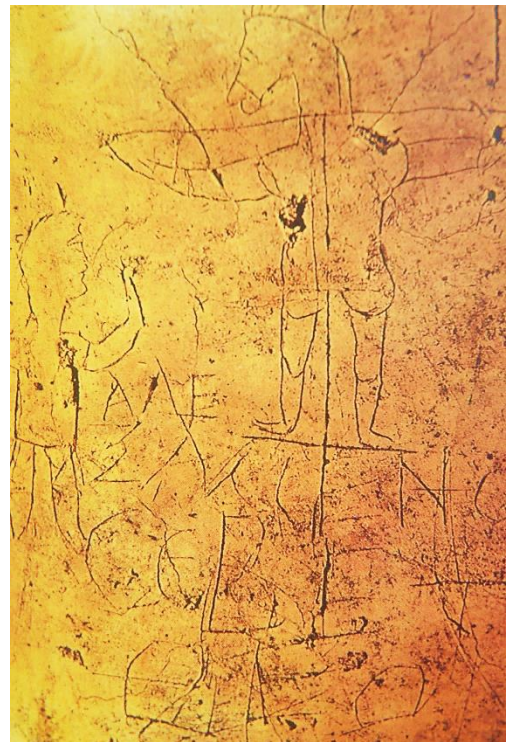


One of 46, this libellus dates to AD 250 during the reign of Emperor Decian. Hermas, the recipient, counter-signed his name in large capital letters.

(University of Michigan)

It should be noted that the figure of the beast who opposes God and persecutes his people is a recurring phenomenon in the Bible. The Pharaoh in the exodus immediately comes to mind (Ex. 5:2). From the Book of Daniel, the same antagonism may be seen in Antiochus IV Epiphanes, when he defiled the temple and sought to destroy the Jews in Jerusalem (Da. 8; 1 and 2 Maccabees); later, Titus' destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was a similar recurrence (Lk. 21:20-24). Still later, the rise of emperor worship in Rome and the persecution of Christians because of their loyalty to Christ was another striking parallel. Finally, the rise of anti-Christ in the end of the age becomes the consummation of this recurring pattern.

For the first readers of the Apocalypse (assuming a date in the mid-90s), it is hardly to be doubted that they would see the beast and beast-worship as representing the emperor cult along with the deadly persecutions that issued from a failure to acknowledge Caesar as Lord and God. Roman persecution against Christians began in the 60s and continued to escalate toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Nero was responsible for executing two of the most important Christian leaders,



Graffito mocking Christians, Palatine Hill, Rome. It depicts Christ crucified with a donkey's head and mocks a Christian by saying in Greek graffiti, "Alexamenos prays to [his] god."

Peter and Paul (early to mid-60s). He also blamed the great fire in Rome on the Christians, punishing them with "the most fearful tortures" (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44). According to Eusebius (early Christian historian), Domitian persecuted Christians heavily toward the end of his reign with banishments and executions. Roman opposition to Christians fluctuated, depending upon the emperor in power. In time, this aggressive stance would result in the issuing of a *libellus*, a certificate proving that one had sacrificed to the Roman gods. Hence, the threat to Christians that began in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century would

continue. Recognizing this does not exhaust the apocalyptic-prophetic genre, however. Just as Antiochus Epiphanes was in a sense “revived” in Titus, so the imperial Caesars will be “revived” in the anti-Christ. This is the most probable meaning of the beast’s head which had the fatal wound but still lived.<sup>2</sup>

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- *John wrote to the church at Ephesus that they had “heard that anti-Christ is coming” (1 Jn. 2:18). Where and how do you think they had heard this?*
- *How did the interpretation develop in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that the 10-crowned horns of the beast refer to the European Union, and what do you think of this theory?*

### THE BEAST FROM THE LAND: 13:11-18

The second beast is a counterpart to the first one. This imagery of two monstrous beasts, the one from the sea and the other from the land, draws from other apocalyptic literature which describes Leviathan, the monster from the ocean, and Behemoth, the monster from the land (1 Enoch 60:7ff.; 4 Ezra 6:49ff.; 2 Baruch 29:4).

The second beast is a parody of Christ. He appears like a lamb (i.e., in imitation of Christ), but the content of his words betrays his allegiance to the dragon. His primary task is to direct the worship of the world toward the first beast, much like Christ directs worship toward God, the Father. For this he later is called the “false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). He performs miracles and wonders, as Jesus and Paul predicted (Mk. 13:22; 2 Th. 2:9). In his efforts to deify the first beast, he creates an idolatrous image of the beast and commands all to worship it. He causes the image to speak and to breathe (possibly an allusion to sorcery, such as was common in the ancient religions, in which idols

were sometimes thought to speak).<sup>3</sup> The dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the land form a counterpart to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a kind of diabolical trinity.

The end of chapter 13 describes the second mark in the Apocalypse. The first was the seal upon the 144,000 believers (chap. 7). Now John describes a counter-mark, the mark of the beast. Thus, there are two sorts of people in the earth, those sealed for God and those marked for the beast. Much effort has gone into the attempt at precisely



*The χάραγμα of Caesar Nero, stamped on Roman coins and without which no one could buy or sell.*

<sup>2</sup> In the fatally wounded head, there is more than likely an allusion to the popular myth of *Nero redivivus*, that is, the widespread notion in the Roman Empire that Nero, who had committed suicide in AD 68, would return from the dead to lead his armies against the city of Rome. In Christian apocalyptic, a triumphant Nero is pictured as the anti-Christ (Ascension of Isaiah 4:1-14; Sibylline Oracles 4:119; 5:363; 8:70). John’s allusion, however, need not be taken as an approval of this myth so much as a drawing from the mythological imagery of resurrection inherent in the myth. John’s point is that a figure like Nero (and like Antiochus Epiphanes and like Titus and like all the other despots) would arise again in the earth to attempt to crush God’s people.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Recognitions of Clement* III:xlvi, Simon Magus of Ac. 8:9ff. was said to have “made statues to move” and “animated lifeless things.”



identifying the mark of the beast and the meaning of the number 666.<sup>4</sup> The word *charagma* (= mark) was normally used to refer to engravings, such as, appeared on coinage, stamps used for documents, or brands upon animals. One also may note that the mark joins together the religious and economic spheres so that the mark becomes compulsory for survival.

In attempting to decipher the meaning of the number, it should be noted that the mark is both a name and a number. This identification is possible in that in both Hebrew and Greek, cardinal numbers are written as letters of the alphabet (Ⲱ or α = 1; Ⲛ or β = 2; ⲛ or γ = 3; etc.).<sup>5</sup> Even in ancient times, this procedure for identification yielded a variety of results. Irenaeus calculated that the number could mean *Euanthus*, but he gives no clue as to whom he thought Euanthus was. He also suggested the name *Titus*, the family name of the emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, as well as the name *Lateinos* (= Latin or Roman Empire).<sup>6</sup> The word *arnoume* (= I deny), representing the demand to recant, was another early proposal. Since then, depending upon the hermeneutic in vogue at the time, the number has been taken to represent the Pope, John Knox, Martin Luther, Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, and even John F. Kennedy. If the *Nero redivivus* legend is at all relevant, the number represents Nero (*Neron* in Latin) in the following way:

N	=	50
E	=	6
R	=	500
O	=	60
N	=	50

If the final “N” is dropped, one has the 616 of the textual variant. If the full name *Neron Kaisar* (Nero Caesar) is put into Hebrew, the equivalent is 666. This latter solution is the generally accepted conclusion of most scholars. Unfortunately, the abundance of possibilities makes certainty almost impossible. One may assume that the first readers of the book had a pretty good idea of what was intended. Today, lacking their perspective, one should avoid dogmatism.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Regardless of the different interpretations, do you think that all Christians can agree that these visions are urging them to discern true worship from false worship, no matter what era in which they live?*
- *When Emperor Domitian erected statues of himself and demanded that all the empire recognize him as “Lord and God,” do you think the readers of Revelation would have associated this demand with the predicted demands about the coming beast?*

<sup>4</sup> Some Greek manuscripts list the number as 616, but the evidence strongly favors the traditional 666, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: UBS, 1971), pp. 749-750.

<sup>5</sup> A scribble on a wall in the excavated ruins Pompei reads, “I love her whose name is 545.” The name “Jesus” is given in the Greek of the *Sibylline Oracles* 1:324ff. as 888.

<sup>6</sup> *Against Heresies*, 30.