

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE SEVEN HEADS OF THE BEAST:

In interpreting the seven heads of the beast, John offers a double meaning. The seven heads represent seven hills; they also represent seven kings. The identity of these seven kings has been one of the most disputed features in the book, and indeed, critical for one's view of the whole book.

Seven Hills

Hills or mountains in apocalyptic and prophetic literature often are symbols of power and/or rulership (cf. Da. 2:35; Jer. 51:24-26). If this should be the sense that John intends, then the meaning of his two interpretations would be identical. The seven hills and the seven kings are one and the same. However, the use of a double verb in the Greek text seems to suggest a double interpretation, not necessarily synonymous. A familiar expression in the ancient world in John's time for the city of Rome was "the city of seven hills."¹ Rome thus epitomized all the opposition shown toward God's people. The interpreter should not confine the interpretation to Rome alone, however, because as John has already pointed out, "the city" is at once Rome, Babylon, Jerusalem, Sodom, and Egypt, not to mention the nations of the world (11:8, 13; 14:20; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18-19).



Seven Kings

If one adopts a preterist viewpoint and an early date for the book, then the five kings who have fallen are either Julius through Claudius or Augustus through Nero. Either Nero or Vespasian is the king who "is" (17:10a). Vespasian or Titus is the one yet to come. Vespasian initiated the siege of Jerusalem, while Titus, his son, destroyed both the city and the 2nd Temple.

The witness of the early church is strong, however,

that John wrote the Apocalypse in the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96), and if so, then he is the king who "is." The five fallen kings would then be the imperial Caesars after the death and resurrection of Christ. The one to come is unnamed and unknown, possibly the eschatological anti-Christ.

Another suggestion is that the term "king" is fluid enough to refer to a kingdom rather than merely a person (a precedent for such usage seems to be found in Da. 2:36-39; 7:17). If so, then the seven heads could represent the seven major empires in the world: *Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia,*

¹ Virgil (*Aen* vi.782), Martial (iv.64), and Cicero (*Att.* vi.5) as well as others

Greece, Rome, and at the end, the *final kingdom of anti-Christ*. This schematic explains the five fallen heads in terms of empires, the one that now “is” would be Rome, while the one that is yet to arise is unnamed. This interpretation is compatible with dispensationalism. It remains unclear, however, whether one can take a “king” and morph it into an “empire.”

Finally, yet one other interpretation, this one more compatible with the idealist approach, takes its cue from the number seven which denotes completeness. As such, John is not

pointing out any particular empires or potentates at all. Rather, he is using the apocalyptic value of the number seven to describe the totality of evil political powers, whenever and however they arise (cf. 1 Enoch 91:12-17; 93:1-10 and 2 Esdras 14:11). The difficulty with this interpretation is that it leaves the reader wondering why such specific details are provided (five kings are fallen, one is, the other has not yet come) if they are superfluous. So, the debate goes on.

The beast himself, though not one of the heads, qualifies as belonging to them by his rebellious and blasphemous nature. Possibly it is in this sense that he is the eighth but belongs to the seven (17:10b). In any case, it is well to remember that the icon of a seven-headed beast was a very old concept, going back over 4500 years. John seems to employ this stock imagery in his description of the beast with seven heads.



This remarkable artefact from about 4600 BC stands alongside various references in Canaanite and Mesopotamian literature as well as the Bible about a threatening dragon-like creature named Leviathan, a creature with seven heads.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *A basic principle of sound biblical interpretation is to first of all consider how the initial readers (in this case, the seven congregations in Asia Minor) would have understood something before considering how modern people might understand it. How do you think the first readers might have understood the seven heads, one of which “is?”*
- *Does the fact that the image of a seven-headed beast had a long history in antiquity have any bearing the way we should interpret it?*

THE TEN HORNS OF THE BEAST

The apocalyptic imagery of ten horns is drawn from the Book of Daniel, where the prophet viewed the antagonist against God’s people as a coalition of ten kings (Da. 2:40-44; 7:7, 20-27). In Daniel, there are several ways interpreters have grappled with the idea of ten kings, some limiting them to the Hellenistic Period climaxing with Antiochus Epiphanes (generally historical-critical scholars),

some linking them to the imperial Caesars (generally many evangelical Protestants), and some attempting to find contemporary candidates in the modern world (generally dispensationalists).

If one is to understand these kings symbolically (where the number ten would denote fullness), then the horns represent the totality of the nations of the world which are allied with the anti-Christ. This is by far the least complicated interpretation. It should at least be mentioned, however, that an extremely popular dispensational interpretation is that the ten kings refer to the European Union, a view especially popularized by the best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*.² The serious interpreter would do well to be reserved about such views given their sketchy exegesis, manipulation of historical data, sensational character, and tendentiousness. It is to be remembered that other attempts at specific interpretive schemes (such as the one occurring in the time of Napoleon, for instance) have long since fallen.

The alliance between the rebellious nations of the world and the beast will be destroyed at the second advent of Christ at the end of the age. When Christ returns, he will be accompanied by his retinue of faithful followers (cf. Jude 14-15).

The Ten Horns

Once one links Daniel 7 to Revelation 17, following are summaries of the major interpretations of John's 10 horns.

Maccabean	Caesars	Land Areas	Symbolic	EU
<p>Here, the 10 kings represent the Hellenistic rulers from Alexander the Great to Antiochus IV Epiphanes.</p> <p>In Revelation, John only borrows the symbol.</p>	<p>Here, they represent the imperial Caesars from Julius to Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem. This was the view of the ante-Nicene fathers.</p>	<p>Here, they represent land areas either within Rome itself or else east of Rome if they are linked to the kings of the east. This view is popular among historicists.</p>	<p>Here, the number "10" receives an apocalyptic value of totality rather than a mathematical value.</p> <p>They represent a rebellious world united against the Lamb.</p>	<p>Here, they represent a revived Rome at the end of the age—the approximate land area of modern Europe.</p> <p>This view is popular among dispensational interpreters.</p>

The Destruction of the Prostitute

One might assume that the forces of evil would maintain an inner cohesiveness for the sake of survival (cf. Mk. 3:23-26), but John shows that this is not so. Like the mixture of iron and baked clay in Nebuchadnezzar's vision (Da. 2:41-43), the alliance between Babylon and the beast will be shattered. The fall of Babylon, under the sovereign control of God, is accomplished by a

rebellious society turning in upon itself. The driving force behind evil is always a selfish consumption, even if it means consuming one's allies, as Screwtape says to Wormwood, "I think they will give you to me now; or a bit of you. Love you? Why, yes. As dainty a morsel as ever I grew fat on." Later, he signs off with, "Most truly do I sign myself ...Your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle, Screwtape."³

² Hal Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 88-97. More sophisticated approaches to this same interpretation may be found in J. Walvoord, *Daniel, the Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), pp. 72-76, 175; J. Walvoord, *Revelation*, (Chicago: Moody, 1966), pp. 254-255; Dwight J. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), pp. 318-326.

³ C. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Bantam, 1982), pp. 91, 93.

The final sentence in chapter 17 seems to identify the woman with Rome, even as the beast itself has been so identified earlier (17:9). While some have attempted to distinguish between the prostitute and the beast as the alliance between false religion and international politics, the reader probably should not attempt such a precise delineation, since both figures may represent the same thing using different metaphors.

The Fall of Babylon (18:1-24)

Drawing upon his previous references to the fall of Babylon (14:8, 20; 16:19; 17:16), John now addresses the fall of the worldly system in a detailed dirge. The Old Testament inspiration for his dirge comes from passages like Isaiah 13:1-22; 14:3-23; 21:1-10 and Jeremiah 50:1-51:58 in which many of the phrases of Revelation 18 have their counterpart. Those who had profited from the worldly system lament her destruction from a distance, even though they themselves were instrumental in her fall (17:16). The announcement of Babylon's fall is taken from Is. 21:9, while the references to Babylon's desolation and haunting by detestable birds and demons is drawn from Is. 13:21-22; 14:23; Je. 50:39; 51:37.

The Call to God's People (18:4-8)

The call to the people of God to exit Babylon is paralleled in the Old Testament call for Israel to return from exile (Je. 51:6, 45). The piling up of Babylon's sins are like a judgment that reaches the skies (Je. 51:9, 53). The vengeful repayment of Babylon is an echo of the Old Testament call for retribution (Je. 50:29; 51:24, 35, 56). The boasting of Babylon recalls the boasting of her ancient counterpart (Is. 57:5-8), and the sudden destruction of eschatological Babylon has an ancient precedent as well (Is. 57:9-11).

The Lament of the World (18:9-20)

The lust for power and wealth that dominates the worldly system will be sorely missed by those for whom they are life's ultimate value. The destruction of Babylon is abrupt and final, poetically epitomized in the repetition of the phrase "one hour" (18:10, 17, 19). Yet, while the world mourns the loss, the church rejoices, her apostles, prophets, and saints joining in the mighty anthem of triumph to be described later (19:1-8). The rejoicing of the church juxtaposed with the mourning of the world is a reversal of the frightened state of the apostles at the death of Jesus (Jn. 16:20).

The Final Illustration (18:21-24)

As an emphatic symbol of Babylon's fall, a mighty angel threw a boulder into the sea, much as Jeremiah instructed that his oracle against Babylon should be tied to a stone and thrown into the Euphrates River (Je. 51:59-64). As the enemy of God's people, the whore was drunken with the blood of Christian martyrs (cf. 17:6).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Given the complicated interpretive possibilities concerning the seven heads and ten horns, how confident should interpreters be that they can "get it right?"*
- *Even if one acknowledges that a precise interpretation of the heads and horns is moot, what larger message emerges from this whole passage?*