



Revelation 13:1-18

Revelation 13 has inspired wild theories about things to come. Who is the beast? What is the meaning of the number 666? What is the mark of the beast? When I think of such speculations, I am reminded of the words of G.K. Chesterton: “And though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature as wild as one of his own commentators.”¹

John did not write to the churches at the end of the first century in order to fuel their speculations. No, he wrote to encourage and challenge them to be faithful to Christ in the face of enormous pressure not to be. Revelation 13 has to do with human government and the place of the church in the world of politics. In this regard, especially in these times, we need to be encouraged and challenged, not distracted by speculations.

In Revelation 12, we were introduced to the dragon, which symbolizes Satan, who persecutes the church. In Revelation 13, we learn that the dragon has some accomplices: two beasts.

The beast from the sea

Revelation 12:17–13:4:

And he stood on the sand of the sea. 13 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. 4 And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”

The dragon, which symbolizes Satan, stands on the sand of the sea, projecting sovereignty over the earth and sea, in order to summon the beast.

We got our first glimpse of the beast from the sea in Revelation 11:7, where it was seen as rising out of the abyss, the abode of evil, to make war with the two witnesses, who symbolize the church. Now, the abyss is described as the sea.

Just like the dragon, the beast has ten horns and seven heads, which symbolize the pretension to complete power and perfect sovereignty. If we look ahead to Revelation 17, we learn that the seven heads also symbolize both seven mountains and seven kings. The beast itself also symbolizes a king, an eighth king, while at the same time being one of the seven kings. We also learn that the ten heads symbolize ten kings.

The blasphemous names mean the beast claims divinity. Also, the beast is a parody of the Lamb, who has seven horns (Revelation 5:6).

The beast is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7:1-8, which symbolized four consecutive empires and four kings (Daniel 7:17). In Revelation 13, those beasts are rolled into one ghastly beast. The beast is extraordinarily powerful, but it derives its power from the dragon.

The beast is also extraordinarily resilient, surviving a seemingly mortal wound to one of its heads. It's like the Hydra, the serpent-like, multi-headed monster in Greek mythology. If you cut off one of the heads of the Hydra, the head grows back.

So impressed are those who constitute the “whole earth,” the world in opposition to God, that they worship both the dragon and the beast. The rhetorical question, “Who is like the beast . . . ?” is blasphemous, because the same rhetorical question is asked regarding God in the Scriptures (Exodus 15:11, Isaiah 46:5).

If the dragon symbolizes Satan, what does the beast from the sea symbolize? On the first level, the beast

symbolizes the Roman Empire, especially as seen in its emperors. The power of Rome and its emperors seems perfect, complete, divine, and resilient. The city of Rome was built on seven hills. Claims of divinity were made for the Roman emperors. The empire seemingly suffered a fatal blow in 68 A.D. with the death of one of its emperors, Nero, which plunged it into chaos, but it recovered, and now, under the reign of Domitian toward the end of the first century, Rome was as powerful as ever.

Claims of divinity

Revelation 13:5-8:

And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. 6 It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

The beast is allowed to do certain things in these verses, which begs the question: “Who’s doing the allowing?” The beast does the dragon’s bidding, but does the dragon’s pretension to absolute sovereignty match reality? No, God is sovereign over both the dragon and the beast. Moreover, the dragon is on the clock: it only has forty-two months, a period that symbolizes the time between the first coming of Christ and the final coming of Christ.

The beast, claiming divinity, can tolerate no rivals, so he slanders both God and the people of God, who are defined in multiple ways in these verses. The beast doesn’t stop with slander, however; he also conquers the people of God. The victory of the beast, though, is illusory, because those who are conquered turn out to be the conquerors (Revelation 12:11, 15:2). Those who don’t believe in Christ, also defined in multiple ways, are subject to the beast and worship the beast.

God’s “dwelling” is equated with “those who dwell in heaven,” even if they live on earth. Also, every believer’s name has been written in “the book of life of the Lamb who was slain,” which is akin to a heavenly registry.²

By contrast, unbelievers are defined as those who dwell on earth and whose names are excluded from the heavenly registry.

Taking the place of God

At the end of the first century, the beast from the sea took the form the Roman Empire, especially its emperors, but the beast from that day and on into our day has taken many forms. The beast will be with us until Christ comes for the final time. Power becomes beastly when it seeks to take the place of God, demanding total allegiance. Anytime an empire or a ruler or a leader demands total allegiance, there will you find the beast.

The beast is resilient. First, empires and tyrants do not go quietly into the night. Second, even if you manage to defeat them, more will rise in their place. World War I was the war to end all wars, but Hitler, Stalin, and Mao—beasts all—rose up out of the sea, so to speak.

How do we respond to such beasts?

Endurance and faith

Revelation 13:9-10:

If anyone has an ear, let him hear: 10 If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

What are John’s readers in the first-century churches supposed to “hear”? They’re supposed to hear not least that the beast—the Roman Empire—will conquer them, which means that some of them will be taken captive and that some of them will be killed—and that God will do nothing to stop it.³

How should believers respond to this? Not by resisting captivity and not by taking up a sword. If the churches take up a sword in response to the sword taken up against them, then they become no different from the beast.

Instead, the saints of the first century—and any century, for that matter—should respond with “endurance and faith,” resisting neither captivity nor the sword, choosing the way of the slain Lamb instead of the way of the power-hungry beast.

Pledge allegiance

How should we, as followers of the Lamb, respond to the beast: empires and rulers and leaders that demand total allegiance?

First, we should have a healthy suspicion of political institutions and political leaders. We must always remember that our ultimate allegiance is to Christ and the kingdom of God. Therefore, we must hold our political allegiances lightly, whether they are with the left, the right, or the center. We are not like those without God who put their ultimate hope in human government and become subject to the beast and even worship the beast.

The psalmist warns us: “Put not your trust in princes, / in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. / When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; / on that very day his plans perish” (Psalm 146:3-4).

The beast wants you to believe that you don’t need God and that it can handle everything. In our part of the world, the beast wants you to believe that all problems are essentially political problems that can be solved by political means. The Scriptures, on the other hand, trace all problems to human sin: the rejection of God. All human problems, therefore, are essentially spiritual. The solution is therefore spiritual: it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which declares that Jesus is Lord and which reforms individual character.

If a person comes to faith in Christ, that will do way more for that person’s behavior than the passage of legislation or rulings from the bench.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and pastor, and others in the so-called Confessing Church recognized that Hitler was making a claim on the German people that only Christ can make. They adopted the Barmen Declaration in May 1934, insisting that Christ, not Hitler, was the head of the church. Later, Bonhoeffer was taken captive and executed. “If anyone is to be taken captive, / to captivity he goes; / if anyone is to be slain with the sword, / with the sword must he be slain.”

If we are citizens of the United States of America, we pledge allegiance to the flag, but we do not pledge total allegiance. We pledge total allegiance to Christ and to the worldwide kingdom of God, for Christ has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). Therefore, we must rise above nationalism. We are not nationalists; we are transnationalists if you will. For us, it’s not America first—or any country first, for that matter. It’s kingdom first.

The dragon works through the beast from the sea. It also has another accomplice.

The beast from the earth

Revelation 13:11-15:

Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. 13 It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, 14 and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.

Now John sees another beast, this one coming not out of the sea but out of the earth. John does not report seeing multiple heads, but he does see two horns. Especially inasmuch as the horns are said to be like that of a lamb, the beast from the earth, like the beast of the sea, is also a parody of the Lamb—that is, Christ. It looks like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon. The dragon symbolizes Satan, and Satan is a deceiver. The beast from the earth speaks falsehood.

The dragon gave authority to the beast from the sea, and the beast from the sea gives authority to the beast from the earth. The beast from the earth uses this authority to speak falsehood so that the earth-dwellers—that is, unbelievers—worship the beast.

But that’s not all. The beast from the earth also has authority to perform great signs, even calling down fire from heaven, mimicking the prophet Elijah, in order to convince unbelievers to make an image of the beast, whom they worship (1 Kings 18:36-39, 2 Kings 1:10-14). Moreover, it’s even able to give breath to the image, mimicking God, who gave the breath of life to his two witnesses (Revelation 11:11).

Finally, the beast from the earth has the authority to make the image speak, which has the effect of causing all who don’t worship the image to be killed. “If anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain.”

The beast from the earth echoes Pharaoh's magicians, who were able to mimic the first two plagues. However, inasmuch as the magicians were only able to mimic the first two plagues, their power was limited (Exodus 7:22; 8:7, 18). Whatever power the beast from the earth has is limited.

Unholy trinity

If the dragon symbolizes Satan and the beast from the sea symbolizes the Roman Empire, especially its power, what does the beast from the earth symbolize? Help comes from later in the book of Revelation, where the second beast is identified as "the false prophet" who promotes false worship (Revelation 19:20).

Just as the beast from the sea symbolizes both the empire and its emperors, the beast from the earth would seem to have more than one expression in its particulars. The beast from the earth could find several expressions in John's day: the imperial priesthood, Rome's propaganda machine, and elites in cities that built shrines to emperors. The beast from the sea represents that part of the empire that promotes, by means of trickery and deception, worship of the empire and its emperors. It represents the Roman religion.

Together, the dragon, the first beast, and the second beast form an unholy trinity mimicking the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father sent the Son, and the Son sent the Spirit. In the first century context, Satan, Roman power, and Roman religion were the evil trinity.

The mark of the beast

Revelation 13:16-17:

Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.

In this section, the beast from the earth uses economic sanctions to secure worship for the beast.

The required mark of the name or number of the first beast on the hand or forehead takes us back to Revelation 7:3-4, where 144,000 servants of God, representing the complete number of God's servants, were "sealed" on their foreheads. We'll meet the 144,000 again in Revelation 14:1, where we see that they had the name

of the Lamb and the name of the Father written on their foreheads. In the new heaven and new earth, "the name of him will be on their foreheads" (Revelation 22:4).

The seal and the mark in Revelation 7, 14, and 22 mean ownership: those who are sealed, those who are marked, belong to God and to the Lamb. Is the mark for believers literal? Not at the end of the first century, when John wrote the book. Not now, either. Believers were—and are—"sealed with the promised Spirit," whose presence means that they belong to God (Ephesians 1:13).

Inasmuch as believers weren't marked literally, John probably didn't expect unbelievers to be marked literally. In any event, the meaning of the mark meant loyalty to the beast—that is, the Roman Empire. John is warning his readers, the servants of God, that they will be forced to make a choice between Caesar and Christ, that the choice for Christ will be costly, and that you cannot serve two masters.

The number of the beast

Revelation 13:18:

This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

John encourages us to "calculate" the number of the beast; then he calculates it for us: it amounts to 666. That number is the number of "man," the number of humanity, not the number of "a man."⁴ What numbers have already been associated with the beast? The numbers seven and ten. The beast appeared perfect and complete, as those numbers would indicate, but it's not. It falls short of the perfect number seven; it falls short three times—in multiple ways. God is "holy, holy, holy"; the beast is six, six, six (Revelation 4:8). The 666 beast opposes the 144,000, the 12x12x10x10x10 servants of God, who we will meet again in the next verse.

This is not an esoteric mathematical puzzle. The purpose of the number is not to identify the beast; John has already done and will do, much to equate the beast with the Roman Empire and its emperors. No, the purpose of the number is to characterize the beast. The number of the beast is "the number of man," the number of humanity, which unmasks the beast's pretension to perfection, completeness, and deity and indicates that it is unholy in multiple ways: opposed to God and the people of God.

Sealed by the Spirit

The beast from the earth represents religion that promotes total allegiance to the beast from the sea: empire and rulers. It is religion that becomes enmeshed with earthly power.

The church of Christ at times has become, and is always vulnerable to becoming, the beast from the earth. One of the reasons John wrote the book of Revelation was to encourage the churches at the end of the first century not to compromise with the oppressive Roman system and to persevere in the face of whatever persecution and suffering come their way. The beast from the earth is the false prophet of compromise that would make it easier to give one's total allegiance to political institutions, parties, and movements while maintaining the illusion that one is remaining loyal to Christ.

Think back to Nazi Germany. Among professing believers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others who opposed the Nazis were in the minority. Most supported Hitler and encouraged others to do so. They became another expression of the beast from the earth.

Closer to home, Chuck Colson writes of the time, before he became a believer when he worked as a special counsel for President Nixon:

When I served under President Nixon, one of my jobs was to work with religious leaders. We would invite them to the White House, wine and dine them, take them on cruises aboard the presidential yacht . . . Ironically, few were more easily impressed than religious leaders. The very people who should have been immune to the world's pomp seemed most vulnerable.⁴

Some in the political parties want to squeeze us into their molds and make us believe that all their issues are righteous issues. Some in one party lump support for the unborn together with the right to bear assault weapons. Some in another party lump support for the poor together with the right to abort unborn children. We must stand for the truth and speak the truth; we must affirm where we can and critique where we must, and no one gets a pass just because they throw us a few bones.

We who have given our allegiance to Christ have been sealed by Spirit: we belong to God, not to any institution, party, cause, or movement. In our dealings with institutions, parties, causes, and movements, we search the Scriptures and pray that God would give us the wisdom we need, for Jesus sends us out as sheep

in the midst of wolves—beasts, if you will—and tells us to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

Or will we be seduced?

Speak truthfully, love sacrificially

John tells us what Revelation 13 is about: “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.” Let us, therefore, renew our allegiance this day to the kingdom of God so that we may follow Jesus in the power of love over against the love of power.

“If anyone is to be taken captive, / to captivity he goes; / if anyone is to be slain with the sword, / with the sword must he be slain.”

Jesus was taken captive by the beast. He was slain by the beast. When Rome crucified Jesus, *or when Jesus let Rome crucify him*, who won?

Jesus won, of course, but think it through. He submitted to the beast not least for the sake of those who constitute the beast. When some Roman soldiers saw the way that Jesus died, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54). God meant for the crucifixion of his Son to be a double victory: victory for his Son, victory for those who would believe in his Son, even for those who constituted the death squad of the beast that killed his Son.

Speak the truth, yes. Jesus spoke truth; that's why they crucified him. In the book of Revelation, Jesus uses a sword, but it's a sword that comes out of his mouth (Revelation 1:16, 19:15). Don't use spin. Leave that to the false prophets. If you spin for long enough, you lose your ability to separate truth from falsehood.

If the beast wants to take you captive or slay you, so be it. Or, more likely around here, if the beast wants to ostracize you, so be it. The kingdom of God doesn't come as we take up a sword; it comes as we take up a cross. Choose the way of the slain lamb, not the way of the power-hungry beast. After all, your name is written in the book of life of the Lamb, who was slain.

At the national prayer breakfast in 1994, Mother Teresa did both: she spoke truthfully, and she loved sacrificially. She condemned abortion in no uncertain terms, and she also said, “Anybody who doesn't want the child, please give it to me. I want the child.”⁵

The empire of Jesus

Finally, listen to Martin Luther King:

Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military genius, looking back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But centuries ago, Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him." Who can doubt the veracity of these words? The great military leaders of the past have gone, and their empires have crumbled and burned to ashes. But the empire of Jesus, built solidly and majestically on the foundation of love, is still growing.⁶

Endnotes

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908).

² More likely, it is the slaying of the Lamb that is depicted as happening before the foundation of the world, not the writing of names in the book. This doesn't mean that Christ was crucified before the world was created; he was crucified in the first century, of course. It means that God's redemptive plan, featuring the crucifixion of Christ, was established before the foundation of the world.

³ Originally, these words were applied to unfaithful Israel, which was destined for judgment (Jeremiah 15:2, 43:11). Now, those words are turned around and applied to the faithful church. In fact, John indicates that God has destined some to be taken captive and killed.

⁴ The noun translated "a man" appears in Greek as a single word. As such it can be translated with or without the article "a." In this case, it's preferable to translate it without the article.

⁵ Chuck Coulson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 47-55.

⁶ Mother Teresa (Speech, National Prayer Breakfast, Hilton International Ballroom, Washington D.C., February 3, 1994)

⁷ Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love* (New York: Collins Publishers, 1977), 47-55.