



THE REIGN OF SATAN

The Great Counterfeiter

August 27, 2017

Revelation 13

The First Beast

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?"

5 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. 9 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.

The Second Beast

11 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

Study Notes

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. 16 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. 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.

The beast from the sea (13:1-10)

It is accepted throughout the New Testament that in the last days there will be a special outbreak of the powers of evil. Sometimes this is associated with an individual who may be called the antichrist (1 John 2:18) or 'the man of lawlessness' (2 Thess. 2:3). It is this figure who is behind the opening vision of this chapter. John does not name him but calls him 'the beast'. A wealth of picturesque detail brings out the horror associated with him. He is closely linked with Satan, and indeed is something like an incarnation of the evil one. Many see in the beast a reference to the Roman Empire but this seems to be too simple. We may well see in the Empire a preliminary manifestation of the evil that will one day be realized to the full in the antichrist. But there is much more to the beast than ancient Rome.

1. *The dragon* stands on the seashore as John sees his henchman, the beast, emerge from the sea (cf. Dan. 7:3). The ancient world often associated evil with the sea. Who could tell what existed in its mysterious depths? With its constant change and movement it well symbolized 'the seething cauldron of national and social life, out of which the great historical movements of the world arise' (Swete; cf. 17:15; Isa. 17:12). For the *beast* see note on 11:7. The description reminds us of Daniel 7:2-7, but this beast is more horrible than those of Daniel; he combines in himself the horrors there distributed among the four. He has *ten horns and seven heads*, as does Satan (12:3). That the two have the same appearance probably means that the evil we see on earth is but a copy of the evil one.

The chapter says little about the dragon. He remains very much in the background. He does his work not openly, but through people. John is talking about a more than human evil, but it is an evil that reveals itself in human deeds. The modern world, like the ancient, furnishes us with illustrations. Hendriksen sees the beast as signifying 'worldly government directed against the church', and he takes the multiplicity of heads to indicate that this has various forms, as Babylon, Assyria, Rome, etc.

The beast has *ten crowns* on his horns, which is a curious place for them (Satan has them on the heads, 12:3). But it is a way of stressing that his dominion (*diadēmata* are crowns of royalty; see note on 12:3) rests on force, while leaving the heads free for the *blasphemous name*. It is not certain whether we should read the 'name' or the 'names', the *ms* evidence being divided. If the former, all the heads have the same name; if the latter, they differ. Either way there is contempt for the things of God (v. 6).

2. *The beast* is likened to a *leopard* (or 'panther' as some understand *pardalis*). The *feet* are those of a *bear* and the *mouth* like that of a *lion*. Since the animal has seven heads the singular, *mouth*, is curious. We should be clear that John's interest is in symbolism. He is not going into detail to help his readers visualize the beast. In fact it seems impossible to put together all the features John mentions to make up one animal. But that is not his intention. He is making use of a variety of the features of the animals mentioned in Daniel 7.

His composite beast thus becomes indescribably horrible. He combines in one the terrible features hitherto associated with different beasts. The beasts of Daniel 7 are to be understood of the various world empires and it may well be that this is in mind with John's beast. In that case he stands for a final empire in which will be concentrated the frightfulness of all its predecessors. But John does not see the beast as having any power of its own. The dragon gave it its power, its throne, and great authority. The combination adds up to a formidable foe. John's readers should not think that the powers of good are opposed to a negligible enemy.

3. John says that *one of the heads ... seemed to have had a fatal wound, which, however, had been healed*. He does not say how the beast received its wound (in v. 14 we find it was 'by the sword'). He does not even say whether it received the wound after it came to land or how it came to be healed. His interest is in the fact that a wound that appeared to be mortal had been healed. Two points receive emphasis: the deadliness of the wound and the fact of recovery. He uses the expression *hōs esphagmenēn*, 'as though slain', which he used of the Lamb in 5:6, and as the recovery of the beast is clear there may possibly be the thought of death followed by resurrection. This is one of several places in which the evil one is pictured as parodying Christianity.

Those who see in the beast the Roman Empire think of the heads as Roman emperors and usually refer the healing of the deadly wound to the Nero *redivivus* myth. Nero was so evil that many could not believe that death was the end of him. The expectation arose that he would reappear in a resurrected form. Others think that Caligula is meant, for he had a dangerous illness and recovered. What is not often noticed by those who see the Empire as the meaning of the beast is that it is not said that the head died and was restored. Rather it was the beast that suffered a deadly wound, located in one of its heads, and was healed. There is no suggestion that the head was restored. We are justified in reflecting that there is an evil which comes ultimately from the dragon and which is found both in the human heart and in the communities of men. And it apparently cannot be slain. Though wounded it rises again and will do so to the end of time, to people's amazement (*the whole world was astonished*).

4. The effect was to convince the world of the futility of resisting the beast. So people worshipped *the dragon*, the ultimate source of the beast's power, and *the beast* as well. The connection between the two is obviously close. Swete, who sees a reference to the Roman Empire, comments, 'It was not moral greatness but brute force which commanded the homage of the provinces. The invincible power of Rome won Divine honours for the worst and meanest of men.' Without confining ourselves to the Roman Empire, such a comment shows the sort of thing that is in mind. *Who is like the beast?* may be meant as a parody of a similar Old Testament expression (Exod. 15:11; Ps. 35:10). And in view of the activities of the angel Michael it is possible that we should also detect a reference to the meaning of his name, 'Who is like God?'

5. The verb *was given* shows that the beast's power is derived; he has no power of his

own. It is given him by his master, the dragon. But John's readers will reflect that ultimately it is God who determines the limits within which he operates, a point brought out by the use of *was given* four times in verses 5–7 (NIV omits it before *authority* in verse 5). It is further emphasized by the limit of his *authority* to *forty-two* months (for this period see on 11:2). Even the horrible and irresistible beast can exercise authority only during the time that God permits. The saints are encouraged by the thought that the duration of their suffering has already been determined by God. It is not the beast who decides this point. His power is limited though he speaks *proud words and blasphemies*.

6. The blasphemies are particularized. *To blaspheme* the name of God is much the same as to blaspheme God (*slander* translates *blasphēmēsai*), for the name sums up the whole person (see note on 2:3). If we read *and after dwelling place* (it is omitted in many good MSS) the blasphemy is against God, against heaven and against all who are in heaven. If we omit it (as seems the best reading) God's dwelling is equated with God's people. The blasphemy is then directed against God and those in whom God dwells. To regard the state as supreme (and offer divine honours to the emperor as was demanded in the first century) was not a permissible opinion but the supreme blasphemy. John's word must have come to his readers with tremendous force.

7. Once again the verb *was given* stresses the beast's subordinate position. It is important to see that even the antichrist can function only by divine permission. This is all the more significant as it comes in a passage telling of divine honours accorded the beast. Divine honours for one who can do only what the God whom the little Christian church worships allows him to do! On this occasion authority is given for him to make war with the saints (cf. Dan. 7:21). These words are lacking in some MSS but should be read (see note in GNT). As a result of this war he obtains *authority over every tribe, people, language and nation* (see note on 5:9). Incidentally this shows that something more than the Neronic persecution is in mind, for that was not worldwide.

8. With a change to the future tense John looks to the time when full divine honours will be paid to the beast (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4) by all on earth (for the *inhabitants of the earth* see note on 6:10). This is a phenomenon that recurs. 'Again and again there emerge bestial forces out of the filmy depths of the nations that fascinate and mesmerize humanity until all the world wonders after and worships the beast, except those whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world' (Torrance).

This last point is important. It is true that these people have set themselves in opposition to God. It is true that they are willing worshippers of the beast. But the significant thing is that their *names have not been written in the book of life* (cf. 3:5; 21:27). John wants his little handful of persecuted Christians to see that the thing that matters is the sovereignty of God, not the power of evil. When a man's name is written in the book of life he will not be forgotten. His place is secure.

The book of life is connected with *the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world*.

It is as the slain Lamb that Christ brings salvation. There are the two thoughts that it is the atoning death of Christ that is significant and that the salvation he brings is no afterthought. *From the creation of the world* should be taken with *slain* (cf. 1 Pet. 1:19–20) rather than with *written* (as mg.; this refers it to election as Eph. 1:4). Either way God's eternal purpose is in view and is contrasted with the fleeting might of the powers of evil.

9. John counsels attention in a phrase reminiscent of the Synoptic Gospels and of 2:7 (where see note). It may refer to what follows rather than to what precedes.

10. There are textual difficulties here. NIV follows a text which takes both couplets to refer to the persecuted, while AV refers both to the persecutors. Better is RSV, 'If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain.' The first couplet teaches an acceptance of the realities of life. If it is in the providence of God that the Christian is for captivity, then to captivity he will surely go (cf. Jer. 15:2). But the second has to do with requital. Anyone who kills with the sword will be killed as he has killed (cf. Matt. 26:52). If the Christian takes the sword he will not establish the faith, for the truth of Christ cannot be defended by violence. He will simply perish by the sword. But the persecuted can know that the last word is not with the persecutors. This is not fatalism, but the conviction that God is sovereign and works out his good and perfect will. In the days of persecution this is a strong consolation. AV is closer to the Greek than NIV with 'Here is the patience (better, "steadfastness"; see note on 2:2) and the faith of the saints'. The saints trust a God who works in the way just outlined.

The beast from the earth (13:11–18)

The beast is not alone. John turns his attention to a second beast, the henchman of the first. In that he secures worship of the image of the first beast (v. 12) the second seems to stand for a priesthood. If we find an illustration of the first beast in the Roman Empire we will see the imperial priesthood in the second. Unhappy results always follow when state power is allied to a false priesthood. This second beast is seen by some as a parody of the Holy Spirit, with its miracles and its fire from heaven (v. 13).

11. The second beast came up *out of the earth*. His origin in the familiar earth makes him less mysterious than the first which came from the sea. He is less fearsome, for he has but *two horns* whereas the first had ten, and seven heads besides (v. 1). *Like a lamb* (cf. Matt. 7:15) seems to be a parody of Christ which is further brought out when this beast is called 'the false prophet' (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). It is possible also that we should understand the *two* (of the horns) as in contrast with the two witnesses (ch. 11). All in all this beast looks like a dreadful parody of the truth. He spoke *like a dragon*; his speech resembles that of the evil one.

12. He is formidable. He has *all the authority* of his predecessor. But he is in no sense a rival for he makes people worship the first beast. It is not easy to see what *the earth* means in distinction from *its inhabitants* in worshipping. Probably the combination simply

stresses totality. The whole world is caught up in this worship of the beast, characterized again as the one *whose fatal wound had been healed*. Clearly this made a tremendous impression.

13. Magic was common among first-century priesthoods as a means of impressing the gullible. So this beast does (habitually, present tense) *great and miraculous signs*. This noun is sometimes used in Revelation of the visions John sees (12:1, 3; 15:1), but a number of times also for miracles. In this sense it always denotes miracles worked by evil powers (here, v. 14; 16:14; 19:20), a sharp contrast with the Fourth Gospel where it is a characteristic word for the miracles of Jesus. This may be a further example of the parodying of the good. The term indicates that the miracles are not aimless wonders. They have a deep significance and are part of Satan's plan (cf. Mark 13:22; 2 Thess. 2:9). An example is the making of *fire to come down from heaven*. This is not said to have destroyed the beast's enemies or the like. It is apparently simply meant to arouse admiration.

14. By his miracles he deceives people and establishes his position. *The inhabitants of the earth* in this book seems to mean unregenerate mankind (see note on 6:10). The beast can deceive only unbelievers. There is an important spiritual truth here. If anyone serves God with all his heart he will not be taken in by the empty miracles of the deceiver. But one who turns from God predisposes himself to believe the lies of the second beast. *Was given* characteristically emphasizes the derivative nature of this beast's power. His miracles were done *on behalf of the first beast* which may be another example of parody, for the two witnesses stood 'before the Lord of the earth' (11:4), the Greek preposition both times being *enōpion*. There is an implication of a readiness to serve and obey. The second beast instructs his followers to *set up an image* to the first, who is characterized yet once more by his recovery from his deadly wound.

15. John will not allow us to forget for one minute the derivative nature of the beast's power; it *was given*. The second beast is now permitted to give *breath* to the *image of the first*, so that it spoke. There are many stories of speaking images in the ancient world. Kiddle reminds us that 'the breath of life' is associated with the Creator-God and continues, 'When the priests of Antichrist have thus animated their idol, they have acted a blasphemy exceeding that of all previous idolators; this is the magician's most impious usurpation of God's power.' Grammatically it is the image which causes the death of the non-worshippers. But perhaps we should understand a change of subject so that it is the second beast who made the image speak and caused the death of those who refused to worship it.

16. He now caused a *mark* to be set on all people on the *right hand or forehead*. The listing of various classes, *small and great* (for which see note on 11:18) etc., is a way of stressing totality. No-one was exempt. The choice of right hand or forehead is presumably for conspicuousness. It could not be hidden. It may also be meant as a travesty of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries (little boxes containing extracts from the Bible) on the left hand (or forearm) and on the head. It is probably also a parody of God's seal (7:3; 14:1). The precise significance of the mark is uncertain. Barclay sees several possibilities: if from

the branding of domestic slaves, 'it means that those who worship the beast are the slaves, the property of the beast'; if from the custom of soldiers branding themselves with the name of a favourite general, 'it means that those who worship the beast are the devoted followers of the beast'; if from the use of sealing contracts, 'it will mean that those who worship the beast accept the law and the authority of the beast'; if from the mark stamped on coinage, 'it will again mean that those who bear it are the property of the beast'; if from the certificate that a man had sacrificed to Caesar, 'the mark of the beast may be the certificate of worship, which a Christian could only obtain at the cost of denying his faith and being false to his Lord. Once he had that certificate he was labelled as a worshipper of Caesar and a denier of Christ.'

17. The purpose, (*so that; Gk. hina*) of the mark is that no-one should engage in trade without it. *Could (dynētai)* is stronger than 'hinder' or the like. It points to a total prohibition, which would make it impossible for people without the mark to buy even necessities like food. It is thus impossible for those who oppose the beast even to live. The *mark* is explained as *the name of the beast or the number of his name*; this leads into the next verse.

18. *This calls for wisdom* is a pause for emphasis (cf. 17:9). The following important statement provides a means by which the intelligent reader (*one who has insight*) can compute the beast's number. The only clues John gives are that it is *man's number* and that it is 666 (or, as some MSS have it, 616). Most students work from the fact that in the ancient world (where people lacked our convenient arabic numerals) it was usual to employ letters to denote numbers. In Greek the first nine letters of the alphabet were used for the units, the next for the tens and so on. The problem then is to find a name which gives a total of 666 when the numbers signified by its letters are added up.

The possibilities are almost endless. In modern times the most favoured solution is 'Nero Caesar' (if the final letter be omitted to give the equivalent of the Latin spelling of the name the total is 616, the variant reading). But to get this result we must use the Greek form of the Latin name, transliterated into Hebrew characters, and with a variant spelling at that (the vowel letter *y* has to be omitted from *qysr*). This solution has its attractions, but no-one has shown why a Hebrew name with an unusual spelling should be employed in a Greek writing. It is also to be borne in mind that in the ancient world when Nero was a considerable figure (the Nero *redivivus* myth is thought by many critics to underlie parts of Revelation), this solution was apparently never thought of. Irenaeus mentions (and fails to adopt) the view that *Lateinos*, i.e. the Roman Empire, was meant. He mentions also *euanthas* and *teitan* (= the emperor Titus?) and favours the latter.

Other solutions are put forward, but none has won wide acceptance. It is possible that such solutions are on the wrong lines and that we should understand the expression purely in terms of the symbolism of numbers. If we take the sum of the values represented by the letters of the name *Iēsous*, the Greek name 'Jesus', it comes to 888; each digit is one more than seven, the perfect number. But 666 yields the opposite phenomenon, for each digit

falls short. The number may be meant to indicate not an individual, but a persistent falling short. All the more is this likely to be correct if we translate ‘it is the number of man’ rather than ‘a man’. 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.¹

REVELATION 13:1-10

A First Monster

¹Then I saw a monster coming up out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads. Each of the ten horns was wearing a coronet, and blasphemous names were written on the heads. ²The monster I saw was like a leopard, with bear’s feet and a lion’s mouth. And the dragon gave the monster its power and its throne and great authority. ³One of the heads appeared to have been slaughtered and killed, but its fatal wound had been healed. The whole earth was awed and astonished by the monster, ⁴and worshipped the dragon because it had given the monster its authority. They worshipped the monster too. ‘Who is like the monster?’ they were saying. ‘Who can fight against it?’ ⁵And the monster was given a mouth that speaks great, blasphemous words, and was given authority for forty-two months. ⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, to curse his name and his dwelling place—that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷It was granted the right to make war against God’s holy people and to defeat them, and it was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation. ⁸So everyone who lived on earth worshipped it—everyone, that is, whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life belonging to the lamb who was slaughtered.

⁹If anyone has ears, let them hear!

¹⁰If anyone is to be taken captive, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed. This is a summons for God’s holy people to be patient and have faith.

He wasn’t acting alone. That was the conclusion the enquiry reached after a long investigation into the background of a strange murder in a city street. A foreign diplomat had been stabbed by a young man who ran away, but was caught. At his trial he appeared to be confused, distracted, unsure of himself. He didn’t give anything away; but the more the court heard the barrister questioning him, the more they all reached the same

¹ Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 160–169). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

conclusion. This wasn't just a crazy man doing something wicked on a whim. There was more to it than that. There were dark forces behind it all. The only question was, 'Which forces?' Which country had hired, or bribed, this young man to kill the diplomat? How might you tell?

As often in the world of realpolitik, or underworld dealings, so in the world of spiritual warfare: the ultimate powers prefer not to show themselves, but to act through others. They choose secondary or tertiary intermediaries; they give them some of their power; they back them up where necessary. We are today perhaps more aware than some of our forebears of how what we call 'dark forces' go to work.

It is, of course, easy to invent conspiracy theories about everything, to see hidden influences at work in what are in fact random events. But it is just as easy, and dangerous, to imagine that events are proceeding in a purely random fashion, when in fact there are powers, forces, energies propelling them in one particular direction.

We talk about 'forces' or 'powers' ('economic forces', 'cultural pressures', and so on); ancient Jews used more vivid language. The present section draws heavily on a biblical passage that was hugely popular in the first century, namely Daniel 7. Many believed that this chapter, together with chapters 2 and 9, predicted the overthrow of pagan empire and the ascent to power of God's people, Israel (or at least the righteous within Israel). The chapter was therefore studied intensely in the hope of finding a clue to what exactly was going on. Fresh expositions of it were offered (perhaps the best known is in the book called 4 Ezra or 2 Esdras, written after the fall of Jerusalem towards the end of the first century). Jesus himself made this chapter one of the key themes in his understanding of his own role in God's purposes.

In Daniel 7, there are four monsters that come up out of the sea. They are, like so much in this kind of writing, the stuff of nightmares. The first is a winged lion. The second is a bear with three tusks in its mouth. The third is a leopard with four wings and four heads. Then comes the fourth beast, greater and more terrible, with iron teeth and bronze claws. It has ten horns, with a further little horn growing up beside them.

The interpretation is quite clear. These monsters represent four kingdoms, the fourth of which in particular will become a great and brutal world empire. The horns represent different kings, the last one of whom will make war against God's people and blaspheme God himself. Then comes the great reversal: 'the Ancient of Days' takes his seat for a court hearing, sitting in condemnation over the last great monster and destroying his power, giving it instead to the 'one like a **son of man**' who comes to be presented before the Ancient of Days and to receive an everlasting, universal sovereignty.

There is no question but that John has this passage of Daniel firmly in mind. No question, either, how he and many in his day were reading it. They are not interested in actual monsters, great Day-of-the-Triffids creatures crawling up out of the Mediterranean Sea to attack the holy land. They are interested in the earthly reality which these monsters

represent. And in the first century the identification was not difficult. John's single monster has telescoped Daniel's four into one, part leopard, part bear, part lion, with ten horns and seven heads. The monster is Rome.

Or rather, as we shall see, the monster is the dark power of pagan empire, straddling the earth, crushing everything in its path, blaspheming other gods who get in the way so that it alone (and the dragon who has given it its power) may be properly worshipped. This, perhaps, explains why Pergamum was described in 2:13 as 'where the **satan** has his throne': it was a centre of imperial rule and cult, and John sees behind the pomp and the purple to the dark spiritual reality of satanic rule which has enabled the empire to impose itself across so much of the world. Rome is the obvious and only 'monster' candidate in the first century. But the phenomenon of heartless, dehumanized pagan empire, sadly, did not end with the decline and demise of Rome. That is why the sharp relevance of all this for John's own readers remains, in a different guise, for other readers to this day.

Verse 3 draws attention to a particular feature of Roman rule in the second half of the first century. The ancient Roman republic had become an 'empire' under Augustus, a hundred years or so before, after the murder of his adopted father Julius Caesar (44 BC) and the ensuing civil wars. But with the reign, and then the death, of Nero one might have thought that the precarious, self-glorifying, top-heavy empire would come crashing down under its own weight. Certainly the year after Nero's death (AD 69) must have looked like a mortal wound to the whole monstrous system, with four would-be emperors in quick succession marching on Rome, killing their enemies, claiming the crown, and then—except for the last one—being killed in turn by the next army to arrive. Galba, Otho and Vitellius came and went; Vespasian came, and stayed. Within months his son and heir, Titus, completed the military task on which Vespasian had been engaged before his troops encouraged him to go for the big prize. Titus's legions destroyed Jerusalem, burning the **Temple** to the ground. To many observers, it must have seemed like the end of the world.

Meanwhile, rumours went around that Nero hadn't died after all—or that he had indeed died, but had then come back to **life**. Several would-be 'Nero-alive-again' leaders emerged, and, though none lasted long, the rumour persisted. He was, is not, but is to come, they said (17:8). This may be what John is referring to when he says that one of the monster's heads appeared to have been killed, but its fatal wound had been healed (verse 3). But the central and important feature, which all his readers would have recognized at once, is that the monster claimed worship, and shared that worship with the dark pagan gods that stood behind it. A glance at Roman coins of the period tells its own story, as one emperor after another not only claimed to be 'son of god' but to dress up in the garb traditionally associated with this or that ancient pagan divinity.

And of course, once the emperor becomes a god, there is no room for other gods. It's all right if local and tribal deities are still worshipped, so long as one worships the new god, Rome and the emperor. But if one refuses—as the Christians knew they were bound to refuse—then a collision course is set. Like Daniel and his friends in the early chapters of the

book from which John drew so richly, all the world seemed to be worshipping the monster. Only the faithful few, here described in terms of their names being in the lamb's book of life, refuse to do so.

The last verse of this section may reflect John's sober realism when contemplating the scene he has now drawn. Some people are going to be taken captive. Others are going to be killed with the sword. That's just the way it is. The proper response is not to kick and scream, but to hold firm to patience and **faith**. Chapter 11 meant what it said. It is through the faithful witness unto death that the lamb wins the victory, that God's **kingdom** replaces the kingdom of the monster, that the dragon himself is to lose the last remains of his power. How this is to be worked out we have yet to see. But what John is doing at this point is sketching the larger, darker picture within which the little local struggles of the churches must be seen if they are to make sense, and if the challenge to uncompromising witness is to make sense. Only when we remember the dragon and the monster do we realize what a deadly serious thing Christian faith, patience and holiness really is.

REVELATION 13:11-18

A Second Monster

¹¹Then I saw another monster coming up from the earth. It had two horns like those of a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon. ¹²It acts in the presence of the first monster, and with its full authority, and it makes the earth and those who live on it worship the first monster, whose fatal wound had been healed. ¹³It performs great signs, so that it even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of people, ¹⁴and it deceives the people who live on earth by the signs which it has been allowed to perform in front of the monster, instructing the earth's inhabitants to make an image of the monster who had the sword-wound but was alive. ¹⁵It was allowed to give breath to the monster's image, so that the monster's image could speak, and it could kill anyone who didn't worship the monster's image. ¹⁶It makes everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slaves, receive a sign from it, marked on their right hands and on their foreheads, ¹⁷so that nobody can buy or sell unless they have the mark of the name of the monster or the number of its name.

¹⁸This calls for wisdom. Anyone with a good head on their shoulders should work out the monster's number, because it's the number of a human being. Its number is Six Hundred and Sixty-Six.

I sat in the room, surrounded by shelf after shelf of old books. It felt good. When we took a break from the seminar (it was in a hotel in a large American city), I got up and walked over to the nearest bookcase to inspect what treats it might hold in store. A rude shock awaited me. It wasn't a bookcase; it was a fake. What seemed to be shelves were less than an inch deep. Worse, what looked like books were indeed books—or rather, parts of books. Hundred and hundreds of lovely old leather-bound books had had their spines, and the first half-inch of the book, cut off in order then to be glued to a back wall to make it look as

though the room was a genuine library. It would have been easier, actually, to create the real thing with the same books. From then on I found the place creepy, and was glad to escape at the end of the day. It wasn't the real thing; it was a parody.

A parody is what you get when someone produces a fake which looks real but isn't. Sometimes this is done deliberately, for comic effect, as when people turn a Shakespeare tragedy like *Hamlet* into a short, funny skit, or play a Mozart symphony on kazoos and mouth organs. Sometimes it is done with the intent to deceive. And if you deceive enough people your parody becomes a new reality. That is what had happened across the ancient Near East in John's day.

The reality, as John and his readers knew not least from his vision in the throne room (chapters 4 and 5), was that the one sitting on the throne was the all-powerful, sovereign lord of all creation; that the lamb, his son, was the one whose death had conquered the world and rescued people from their slavery to sin in order to appoint them as rulers and priests in God's new creation; and that the **spirit** of God was at work in and through these people to accomplish God's work. The parody, though, which was gaining ground all the time in western Turkey through the first century, was that the Roman empire, gaining its ultimate authority from the satanic dragon, was putting itself about as the world ruler. That was the first monster. And the second, like it but subordinate, seems to be the local elites, in city after city and province after province, who do their best not only to copy the monster at a local level but insist, in order to keep the monster's favour, that everybody in their domain should worship the monster. This was going on all over the place, and John's hearers would have been quite familiar with it. City after city vied with one another to be allowed to build yet another new temple to Rome, to the emperor, or to a member of the emperor's family. These local power-brokers are the second monster, 'coming up from the earth', arising (that is) locally rather than coming across the sea. They complete the Unholy Trinity: the dragon, the first monster, and the second monster, the ghastly combined parody of God, Jesus and the spirit.

Part of the parody of the truth is that the local elites ('horns like those of a lamb', says John: trying to look like what they're not!) even parade the fact of how nearly the monster seemed to have come to being killed, and yet there it is, alive again! Rome had recovered from the apparent death-blow. The Christians, of course, heralded Jesus as the true lamb, and his actual death and **resurrection** was the basis of their allegiance to him, their belief that he had defeated the dragon himself. But the parody was powerful. There were several tricks commonly employed to enable the statues of various gods to move about, to breathe, weep and even speak. Sophisticated pagan writers of the time mention many such devices, pouring scorn on their trickery. But people were taken in, and more and more people, through the work of the local 'monsters', came to worship the first monster itself. And, through that means, the dragon itself.

What's more, worshipping or not worshipping was quickly becoming the dividing line between people who were acceptable in the community and people who weren't. Not long

after this time, some local officials introduced a formal requirement that unless you had offered the required **sacrifices** you weren't allowed in the market. There were various kinds of marks and visible signs which were used to set people apart either as 'able to trade' or as 'not able to trade'. From quite early on the Christians were faced with a stark alternative: stay true to the lamb and risk losing your livelihood, the ability to sell or buy; or capitulate to the monster, sacrifice to Caesar at the behest of the local officials, and then everything will be all right—except your integrity as one of the lamb's followers.

We can understand the dilemma faced by those Christians back then. We like to think that we would always choose the reality and reject the parody. But would we? When we ask ourselves where similar key issues emerge and challenge us today, it may not be as clear-cut as we like to think—and it's quite possible that many Christians in the first century felt like that too. Does it count as a compromise if I use Caesar's coinage, even though it has words like 'son of god' stamped on it? Is it a compromise if I put my stall out by the side of the road during one of the great imperial festivals, to catch the crowds as they are going to the temple, even if I don't go myself? Will it matter if I buy a slab of beef in the market, even though I know it will have been offered in sacrifice in Caesar's temple just up the road? For us, does it matter if we buy a newspaper which openly mocks the Christian **faith** and promotes every other way of life imaginable except the Christian one—even if all I'm going to read is the sports news? Does it matter if I work for a company that, through one of its other offshoots, is cheerfully polluting lakes and rivers and destroying their wildlife? Should I be worried that my bank is a major investor in companies that work in parts of Latin America where labour laws are practically non-existent, allowing them to get away with virtual enslavement of local populations?

These are not the only, nor even perhaps the most important, questions we face. But it's important to recognize that we, too, face choices which may well not be so clear-cut as we would like. We need to pray for discernment to distinguish the reality from the parody, and to act accordingly.

The final verse of the chapter is one of the most famous in the whole book. It offers the greatest parody of all. It is more or less certain that the number 666 represents, by one of many formulae well known at the time, the name NERO CAESAR when written in Hebrew characters. (Many peoples, and many languages, used letters as numbers, as we would if we devised a system where A=1, B=2 and so on.) The monster who was, is not, and is to come looks pretty certainly to be Nero.

But the number 666 isn't just a cryptogram. It's also a parody. The number of perfection, not least for John, would be, we assume, 777. Some have even suggested that the name JESUS comes out, in some systems, as 888—a kind of super-perfection. But for John there is little doubt. Nero, and the system he represented and embodied, was but a parody of the real thing, one short of the right number three times over. Jesus was the reality; Nero, just a dangerous, blasphemous copy. We do well to recognize this, but we also do well to search our consciences and our own societies and enquire to what extent we,

too, have been deceived by fakes posing as the real thing.²

7. The Conflict on Earth Begins

Revelation 13:1–14:20

The focus of the conflict has been moved to the time and place familiar to the first readers of John's book. Whereas in chapter 12 the vision was cosmic in scope, these chapters, though dealing with supernatural beasts and great conflicts, still deal with political and religious situations contemporary to the churches to whom this book is addressed. Yet the references to the contemporary are cryptic, partly because of their visionary character and partly because of their sensitive political nature.

THE BEAST FROM THE SEA

Revelation 13:1–10

13:1–10 A beast emerges from the sea. Perhaps the dragon, standing on the shore (12:18), summoned it forth. Perhaps it arose spontaneously. It is clear, however, that the dragon has control over this beast, so the dragon may very well be understood to have called it from the sea in order to do the dragon's bidding.

The description of the beast is significant in that it bears resemblance to the dragon. (On the basis of some ancient manuscripts, the Revised Standard and other versions add the following to their description of the beast: "ten horns and seven heads.") The body of the beast combines the characteristics of all the beasts in Daniel's vision (Dan. 7:3–7). The sea beast then acts as a proxy for the dragon. The beast represents the Roman Empire, even as the beasts in Daniel's vision represented the political power that sought to destroy God's people then. Remember that from the point of view of Asia Minor the Romans came over the sea, from the West. John puts together the existing imagery from Daniel with the realities of the Roman Empire of his own day.

It is the dragon that gives the sea beast power and authority. It is not that political structures are by nature demonic, but rather that the political structure of the Roman Empire has been taken over by a demonic force. This was not always the case. Paul was quite positive about the Empire, both when he told Christians to honor the public authorities (Rom. 13:6–7) and when he proudly claimed his Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37; 22:25–29). By the end of the first century, however, there had been changes in the emperors' understanding of themselves, which cast an ominous shadow over the empire as far as the Christians were concerned.

John paints the sea beast as a parallel to the Lamb, even as the dragon is parallel to God.

² Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 113–122). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.

The Lamb has been given power and authority as God’s agent for the creation of a redeemed people; the sea beast is the dragon’s—Satan’s—agent for the destruction of such people by creating an unredeemed society, and for that purpose has been given power and authority by the dragon. The Lamb is one who died but has risen. The beast has received a mortal blow, which has been healed. The heavenly gathering worships God and the Lamb; the earthly kingdom worships the dragon and the beast.

The sea beast speaks blasphemous words and has blasphemous names on its heads. Here we come to the crux of the matter for John. Throughout the first century, the Roman emperors had begun to use divine titles for themselves. Earlier, emperors had been considered divine after they died, but now that pattern was changing. There were reports that Domitian, the emperor from A.D. 81–96, wished to be called “lord” and “god.” It is not so much that the emperors spoke against the God of the Christians, but rather that, by taking to themselves the titles that belong only to the true God, they set themselves up blasphemously in the place of God. When such blasphemy occurs, the political structures become demonic. This is what happened to the Roman Empire. At the time of John’s writing, everyone was not required to worship the emperor, but the handwriting was on the wall. Such a time would come.

In 13:5 the beast is “allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.” The one who permits this is God, whose authority is far greater than the dragon’s. God permits the demonic powers to be loose and to attack even the faithful. But the time for this is limited: forty-two months, the symbolic length of time mentioned several times before.

Let us review what various processes or forces are operating during this “time, times, and half a time” or “one thousand two hundred sixty days” or “forty-two months.” First, the nations are allowed to trample over the Holy City (11:2); second, the two witnesses prophesy in the Holy City (11:3); third, the woman clothed with the sun is given refuge in the wilderness and protected from the dragon (12:6, 14); and fourth, the sea beast is allowed to utter blasphemies (13:5). This was the length of time that the temple in Jerusalem had been desecrated during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the context for the visions of Daniel. The problem at that time was the same: The political structures had taken on the character of an imperial cult, appropriating for themselves the honor due to God alone. That time ended with the reconsecration of the temple. Here, as mentioned earlier (see the discussion on 11:1–14), it represents a finite time during which the powers of evil are permitted to have power unchecked by God. But it is God who gives this permission, both to test the faithful and to demonstrate the sin of the unfaithful.

The sea beast is allowed to make war on the faithful, even to kill them. The beast also is “given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation” (13:7), even as the Lamb has gathered a people out of “every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9). The whole population of the earth will be divided into two groups: those who worship the Lamb and those who worship the beast. Faithfulness in this situation means resisting the

beast, even when that means death.

John closes this section with a brief poem: “If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed” (13:10). The second half has echoes of Jesus’ words at his betrayal: “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). In the setting in Revelation 13 this would seem to be a word to those who persecute the church.

But the whole has echoes of Jeremiah’s words, and this seems a more likely parallel in John’s setting. Jeremiah twice says: “those destined for the sword, to the sword ... and those destined for captivity, to captivity” (Jer. 15:2). First these words are part of a prophecy before the Exile, showing the destruction that was to come to faithless Jerusalem. The second time they are words to the Judeans who took refuge in Egypt against God’s directions, prophesying the destruction that Babylon would bring to Egypt and therefore to the exiles who had tried to escape it (Jer. 43:11). In Revelation 13:8–10 those whose names are in the Lamb’s book of life may be called to suffer. If they are destined to captivity or to death, then it will be so. Like the ancient Judeans, this fate will come to them, whether or not they try to evade it. Therefore, they must endure and be faithful.

THE BEAST FROM THE EARTH

Revelation 13:11–18

13:11–18 Another beast appears, and with it a lower level of delegation is reached. This beast is from the earth, not from the sea (13:11). It too is related to the dragon’s power, but only through the sea beast. The new creature has power in the presence of the sea beast and particularly is related to leading human beings to worship the sea beast (13:12). If the sea beast represents the political structures of the Roman Empire that have taken for themselves titles and authority that belong only to God, then this second beast is most likely related to the local religious and political structures that express the imperial cult. This could involve not only the actual priests of that cult but also many of the traditional local institutions of Asia Minor that were readily compatible with the imperial cult and supportive of it. It may be that part of what is meant by this beast coming “from the earth” is its local character, that it represents local institutions and traditions put at the service of the beast from the sea.

This beast is described as looking like a lamb but sounding like a dragon, indicating the parallel between the powers of the true God and the powers of evil. Evidently, proclaiming and publicizing the divine character of the sea beast and urging its worship is the main task of the earth beast. In this, the earth beast is the counterpart of the two witnesses of 11:3. So the levels of derivation are (1) on the side of the true God: God, the Lamb, and the two witnesses; and (2) on the side of the dragon: the dragon, the sea beast, and the earth beast. Each level is a derivation of the higher one and is parallel to the other chain of actions.

Like the two witnesses, this earth beast urges toward worship, and does signs and wonders, specifically with fire. In fact, the earth beast is quite successful. It urges construction of images of the sea beast—evidently the emperor—in order that it can be worshiped. Furthermore, the earth beast manages to have the image speak as though it were alive (13:15). This may mean either that some miraculous power was actually given to the earth beast or, as evidence a few centuries later shows, that methods were devised to make it possible to have a priest speak through a statue without being seen. What is essential here is the content of the image’s speech: Those who do not worship the beast are to be killed.

What we know about this period of time, at the end of the first century A.D., is that emperor worship had increased greatly. Domitian had a statue of himself erected in Ephesus that, judging from the ruins, must have been twenty-three feet tall. There were also temples devoted to emperor worship throughout Asia Minor. These were a new phenomenon, and to John represented a clear danger and threat. Though Christians were not sought out for persecution, they stood in great danger if they came to the notice of the state and refused to recant and refused to perform the worship necessary to show their loyalty to the state.

There is a second great danger from the earth beast: It connects the religious and the economic life of the community in a manner that makes it impossible to participate in the economic sector without being involved in emperor worship (13:16–17). This may refer to the image and titles of the emperor on coinage. It may refer to the religious practices connected with the various trade guilds as mentioned earlier (see the Introduction, the section titled “The First Readers”). In any case, the language in these verses makes the signing of the worshipers of the beast parallel to the signing of Christians in their baptism (7:3). So the followers of the beast are marked with a seal as are the followers of the true God.

The issue is, to whom do human beings belong, to whom do they owe their ultimate loyalty: God or the emperor? There was no such decision to be made as long as the emperor—or the state in whatever form—did not demand ultimate loyalty but rather kept to ordering and organizing community life within clear limits. But when the emperor—or the state—began to go outside of those confines, then conflict was bound to erupt with those who gave their ultimate allegiance to God.

The chapter closes with some of the most enigmatic words to be found in all of scripture: The number of the beast is 666. Whatever this means, it would have been clear to the original audience but is lost to us. There are various ways of creating numbers out of letters, and the author might have been using either a Hebrew or Greek alphabet. The number seems to mean a particular person—perhaps a public official whose duty was concerned with spreading the imperial cult in Asia Minor by public proclamations or by building programs or by both. The name is in code, either because of the danger of mentioning the name or because the code number indicates it is an incomplete, imperfect

number—unlike the perfect 777 or the more-than-perfect 888, which is the number to which the name of Jesus corresponds. We cannot determine the significance of the number 666 at this late date. But that is a minor point in contrast to what we do know about the danger of the earth beast and about the parallels that can occur in our own time.³

³ González, C. G., & González, J. L. (1997). *Revelation*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 85–90). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.