

Beasts of Land and Sea

Revelation 12–13 Part Two

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

He who has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go.

If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and

great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

Few things have fueled more speculation than the biblical witness to the antichrist, and especially the testimony given by John in Revelation 13, to a beast identified by the cryptogram 666. Jeane Dixon, for example, has predicted that the antichrist will appear in our generation because he has already been born. Discussion of the issue are almost bound to bring to mind such diabolical figures as "Rosemary's Baby."

Revelation 13, in fact, speaks of two beasts: a beast of the sea and a beast of the land. It is the latter that is often identified as the antichrist figure. It is part of a wider biblical testimony to such a latter day figure of evil and malice.

...as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. 1 John 2:18

Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. 1 John 4:1-4

...that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 2 Thess. 2:3-4

And then the lawless one will be revealed... The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders... 2 Thess 2:8-9

And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads... Rev. 13:1

...they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies... Rev. 13:4-5

[The beast] was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. Rev. 13:7

Having told us in 12:13-17 of the determination of the dragon, having been hurled out of heaven, to pursue the church, we are now given a more detailed picture of him. The previous chapter ends with a picture of a beast who is standing on the shore of the sea (13:1, though it belongs at the end of chapter 12). Even though he knows his defeat is certain, he continues to harass the saints of God. But how does Satan accomplish his malice? In what form does he persecute and hound the people of God? The answer of Revelation 13 is that the form in which persecution operates is twofold: it is both political and economic.

Two Old Testament backgrounds form the canvas on which John weaves his portrayal of antichristian malice in the last days, understood to encompass the entirety of the period from Christ's resurrection to his Second Coming rather than just a brief period before the end. The figure of two beasts is borrowed from the closing pages of the book of Job where a beast of sea (Leviathan) and a beast of the earth or land (Behemoth) are alluded to in the context of underlining to Job his inability to fathom their origin or purpose. The point being that even though he may not understand, God does, and as with Leviathan and Behemoth, so with providence generally, we are not necessarily given all of the details but we are called upon to trust in the Sovereign Lord who knows all there is to know. The identification of these two creatures is a source of much debate and even though attempts are made to identify them as a crocodile and a hippopotamus, or some now extinct pre-flood creatures of the dinosaur family, it is best not to identify them that closely. Rabbinical interpretations favored the identification of Leviathan as the embodiment of the powers of evil, and the Greek translation of Job with which John would have been familiar rendered 'Leviathan' as 'dragon.'

The other, and probably more influential Old Testament passage that lies in the background of this chapter is Daniel 7. The vision of four beasts representing four successive world-empires now evolves into two beasts, of land and sea, that equally threaten political and economic stability. Figures of diabolical malice terrorize the world order. John depicts a ten-horned, seven-headed, seven-crowned beast (13:2; Dan. 7:4-6), one "speaking great things" (13:5; cf. Dan. 7:6,8), who appears for forty-two months (13:5; Dan. 7:25).

The Beast of the Sea (13:1-10)

As the dragon stands on the shore, John sees a beast arising "out of the sea," (13:1) with ten horns and seven heads (cf. 12:3). This beast is satanic in nature, but is not Satan himself. He is an image of Satan. He is given authority by the dragon (Satan; 13:2).

This appears to be a composite picture of the four beasts of Daniel 7 and the dragon of Revelation 12. On each head there is a blasphemous name (13:1). The background to the blasphemous name is the Roman imperial cult whereby deity was ascribed to the emperor and coins bore divine names. Domitian, for

example, asked to be called "our Lord and our God." To dwellers in Asia Minor, the first recipients of the Book of Revelation, the sight of Roman ships coming on the seas and landing on their shores was in many ways a beast-like image of dominion and power. In Ephesus, for example, a gigantic statue of Domitian was erected celebrating the cult of Domitian. John may well have recalled the story of Daniel 3 and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in their refusal to bow to the image of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar (13:7-8, 14-15, 18).

The beast of the sea, whilst initially signaling the Roman persecutions of the first century and therefore of immediate significance to the first recipients of Revelation, is conveying a hostility of more general significance, one that prevails until the end of time. He exercises his power for a period of 42 months (13:5), the same period of time that has been alluded to before (12:6; cf. 11:3), and signaling the period between the ascension and Second Coming of Christ. He is given a mouth to utter great blasphemies (13:5), and he does so, against God and all who are his (13:6). Though Satan's own direct power has been curtailed, he still exercises dominion through representative agents of worldly government.

For early Christians, it brought to mind the reign of Nero, and a belief Nero redivivus, that in some way, the spirit of Nero had returned to persecute the people of God. But what is in view is something more general. It represents what all political and secular forces seek, however subtly, to destroy the testimony to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of Christ being built on the face of the earth. It has many shapes, many horns. It takes one form and then another form. It represents political power that closes the mouth of Christian believers, secular ideologies that seek to destroy the place of Christian testimony.

One of the beasts seven heads bears a fatal wound now healed (12:3), a wound caused by a sword (12:14). It is reminiscent of the promise of Genesis 3:15, that the head of the serpent would be crushed by the seed of the woman. It is also remarkably similar to the word of Isaiah 27:1:

In that day, the LORD will punish with his sword, His fierce, great and powerful sword, Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent He will slay the monster of the sea.

Similar passages are found in Psalm 74:13 and Hab. 3:8-15. The NIV "seemed to have had" in reference to the fatal wound is not meant to be a statement of doubt as to its reality or even its eventual fatality. It is a parallel (and parody) of Revelation 5:6 and the statement that John saw "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain." Jesus' death had been all too real, but he now stands in resurrection triumph. The beast, too, bears a mortal wound and appears to stand, but it will be short lived, for his eventual doom is certain. His reign is a pretence. He has "authority" (12:2, 4, 5, 7; cf. 12: 12), he is "given power" (12:7; cf. 12:15), but the ultimate sovereignty falls on the One who designates that power and authority, namely God. As is so clearly evidenced in the opening chapters of Job, Satan

and his hosts exercise their power only to the extent that God decrees. Behind this may well lie the suicide of Nero in 68 A.D. and the civil war that followed it, until the empire was stabilized again under the rule of Emperor Vespasian. It is interesting to note that several claims were made that Nero was still alive following his suicide. Whenever Christian persecution broke out under the rule of Domitian, the "healing" of the Roman empire was evident.

The identification of the beast with Nero, however, is difficult, for several reasons, including the fact that Nero was a disgraced ruler who died as a fugitive, and whose death was considered as demonstration of Roman power and not weakness; it was hardly a "fatal" blow. Furthermore, the sword is inflicted by God (or Christ) in 13:3, 12, and 14 and not self-inflicted. It is therefore best to interpret the beast of the sea as more general. What seems to be in view is the aggrandizing power of the state over the lives of people, something which has manifested itself in different ways in different ages and here threatens to be a feature of this-worldly existence to the very end.

Those not protected by God's seal (7:1-4), who are not a part of God's true temple (11:1-2; 12:1,6, 14) become convinced of the beast's authority and worship him (13:4). They are those "whose names are not written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (13:8). Their worship echoes in dark parody the worship true believers give to God: "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" Moses and Miriam had sung:

Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?

Who is like you Majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (Exod. 15:11)

Using the instruments of deception and pretence, the beast manages to fool and hoodwink the ignorant into giving him worship. It is what he craves for, even offering to Christ what he did not possess in order to have him bow before him (c.f. Matt. 4:9). The hoodwink will last for forty-two months, the entire inter-adventual age. The devil would never want to limit his opposition to this small time-span and is a way of denoting to us that though the opposition spoken is fierce and real, it is limited and its boundaries are established by God Himself.

By way of an exhortation to his readers, John now warns by way of allusion to two passages from Jeremiah, the possibility that believers may have to pay the ultimate sacrifice of death in the persecution brought about by the beast (13:10). Already, John has warned of the possibilities that lie ahead for the children of God, including imprisonment (2:10), and death (6:9; 11:7). And further revelations will follow (17:6; 19:2 and 20:4 [beheading]). This calls for what the New Testament describes as "patient endurance and faithfulness" (12:10). It is the same thought addressed to believers in Hebrews 12:1-3 whenever the author

exhorts to run with perseverance (endurance, patience) the race marked out for us with eyes fixed on Jesus, and this, in the face of difficulties of every kind. It is the combination of truths essential for Christian growth and maturity: that suffering is to be expected, that hope inspires facing it with endurance, that such experiences are to be prized as character building and ultimately God-glorifying. Thus Richard Baxter could exhort:

Ye saints, who toil below, Adore your heavenly King,
And onward as ye go Some joyful anthem sing.
Take what he gives And praise him still,
Through good and ill, Who ever lives!
The Beast of the Earth (13:11-18)

Just as John had seen a beast arise out of the sea (13:1), so now he sees another arise out of the earth (13:11). The parody in this image is even more striking than was the case with the beast of the sea. The lamb-like figure, with two horns, speaks like a dragon (13:11). There is no need to engage in fanciful explanations of two horns as opposed to the ten horns of the beast of the sea (13:1) or even the horns of the Messianic Lamb of Revelation 5. John is now alluding to the figure of Daniel 8, just as he had been alluding to Daniel 7 in the earlier part of this chapter. There in Daniel 8 we read of "a ram that had two horns" (Dan. 8:3).

Whereas the first beast is political in nature, the function of the beast of the earth is to encourage the worship of the first beast (13:12). Later in Revelation, this beast of the earth is referred to as "the false prophet" who leads people to worship the state (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). It has all the trappings of religion. Worship is its interest. It has its own "signs" (13:13). It even has a sacrament of its own—a bestial baptism (13:16). And he has a number: 666.

Given that the second beast is a personal figure, who is he? The Reformers, for example, were of one mind in identifying him as antichrist, and in identifying the antichrist as the Roman Catholic church, and the papacy in particular. This identification found its way into the original formulation of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Perhaps, what is in view here is not an antichrist figure, one who can be pin-pointed in history, but a more general description of the religious character of antichrist, just as the beast of the sea had alluded to the political character of antichrist. Just as the beast of the sea had imaged Satan, the beast of the earth parodies Christ himself! In its religious guise, its Christ-like pretence is breathtaking!

There is in view here a seemingly deliberate attempt to parody Christ so that what emerges is in so many ways representative of one who is anti-Christ. Paul alludes to "the Man of lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. There, too, the figure is depicted as appearing at the end of time, but also "is already at work" (2 Thess. 2:7). In just the same way as one beast is followed by another in Daniel's

vision in chapter 7, so successive kingdoms and powers rise in our age that eventually culminate in a figure (or force) of concerted opposition at the end of the age. This is of a piece with John's understanding of the two-fold nature of the Antichrist figure, as one who is to come but also as one who has already come and is currently at work (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:4; 2 John 7). It is salutary to note that false prophecy arises within that of the covenant community (c.f. Matt. 24:5, 11). Such wolves in sheep's clothing have threatened the church from its genesis and now threaten to be a part of its experience to the very end.

The miraculous has always been a feature of false prophets as well true (cf. 2 Cor. 12:12 with Exod. 7:11 where Pharaoh's prophets mimic the miracles of Moses). It was part of the prophecy of the Olivet discourse that "false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect" (Matt. 24:24). Indeed, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to mimic apostolic qualities to the beast of the earth by suggesting that, like true apostles, he is to be seen as a spokesperson for his master, that he derives his authority from his master, and performs signs and wonders as attestation by his master. What is in view is the concerted teaching of a false apostle/prophet who convinces some to worship a system fundamentally in contradiction to the world-view of the kingdom of God. The demand is unilateral and unequivocal: those who refuse to worship the first beast he commands to be killed (13:15). Nebuchadnezzar-like, he does not tolerate those who refuse to do his bidding. To ensure compliance and identification, he mimics the sealing of the true saints (7:3), with a mark of the beast on his stamped on either the right hand or on the forehead of those who are his (13:16).

The Number 666

Attempts are often made to solve the identification of the number 666. Some have sought to do this by reference to the Gematria – the art of representing words and names by addition of the numerical equivalent of each letter. We have something like this in our use of telephone numbers like 1 800 CALL JOE variety. You would use the first nine letters of the alphabet to represent numbers 1 through 9 and then the next nine numbers to represent 10,20,30 etc. through 90, and the following nine letters to represent the number 100, through 900 etc. Nero in Greek doesn't become 666, but if transliterated into Hebrew (as Nero Kaisar, "Caesar Nero" one possible rendition of his name) the number 666 does appear, but only by misspelling his name (and omitting the Hebrew letter yodh). Preterists, who favor an early date for Revelation and see most of its contents as fulfilled in the destruction of Rome in 70 A.D. are particularly keen to cite Nero as the focus of the number 666.

Another attempt to add up the first letter of all the emperors from Julius to Vespasian also produces 666. There is a degree of arbitrariness in this procedure that renders it deeply suspicious particularly if the readers were meant

to be able to do the procedure backwards from a number to individual letters of which the number is a sum of an unknown quantity of letters. No such attempt, for example, is made in identifying other numbers, such as 144,000.

It is clearly said, however, that 666 is "man's number" (13:18). That is, man without God, religious man without God! Since the number 7 is used throughout Revelation as a number of completeness (the seven days of creation and rest), it is likely that John intends 666 to be a parody of 777. A number short of completeness repeated three times is a trinity of imperfection. It is the numerical equivalent of utter imperfection. In this way, Nero is a candidate; but so also is Domitian, Stalin and Hitler.

For such times wisdom and insight are key requirements (13:18). John does not intend to mean the kind of wisdom needed for solving mathematical puzzles so much as that wisdom of which Scripture speaks, the wisdom of knowing God and His ways. It is the wisdom of knowing what life in covenant with God is to be and the best way to live so as to comply with its demands. In the face of the reality of opposition, three skills are now required: patient endurance (13:10) and wisdom (13:18): these are the keys to living God's way in the face of trouble.

Overcoming the Beast(s)

Revelation 12 and 13 provide for us some clear instruction on how we may overcome the influence of the beasts of the earth and sea.

1. It is possible for a believer to overcome because Christ has overcome and now reigns. We are live with this firmly in our minds and hearts. The victory of Christ is not in the future; He has already won the victory. It began in the past. Jesus Christ now reigns and that is why the beast is so furious. He knows his time is short. That is why he seeks to destroy the people of God.
2. We can overcome, so long as we develop spiritual insight (13:18). The wisdom that is called for is spiritual wisdom. We are to recognize that the source of all opposition is hellish. We are to remember that we wrestle against a power that is greater than flesh and blood (Eph. 6:18-20).
3. We are endure patiently (13:10). That is what we need if we look at the dragon or the beasts in the eye. We say to God, "You deal with it." This is coming to me because I belong to you.
4. You can be on the victory side if you learn to be faithful to Christ. It is the cry of heaven that believers overcame him by the blood of the lamb, by their testimony, and by their refusal to shrink from death (12:11). Like Stephen, they overcome by looking to Jesus (Acts 7:56, 59). He recognized that Christ was standing at the right hand of God. He endured faithfully, knowing that it would kill him. And it is

when that resolution is made, that I will stand for Christ, come hell or high water, that victory is assured. When we can make the resolve, "I am for Christ even if it kills me," there is nothing can destroy us.

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