

Revelation 13

We now come to a section that has caused a lot of debate and controversy because it deals with the identity of the beast and the false prophet. Throughout the ages Christians have come up with a lot of possibilities for these two individuals or entities. The best way to understand this whole issue more clearly is to remember three important details.

First, we must keep in mind who the original recipients of the letter were? We must not forget they were first century Christians and this letter provided some hope to followers of Christ who had witnessed many people they loved die for their faith. We must understand they had serious questions when it came to the churches persecution. Namely, why is God allowing this to happen and how long will it continue?

Second, we must understand the Old Testament plays a prominent role in the imagery of Revelation, particularly the Book of Daniel. Keep in mind, the New Testament had not been canonized yet and first century Christians used the Old Testament as their point of reference from a scriptural standpoint. The apocalyptic language found in Daniel was key to identifying what was happening to God's people from a historical standpoint.

Thirdly, we must understand how to read apocalyptic genre. In other words, we must not attempt to interpret the strange imagery as literal. People have asked why the book of Revelation was written in apocalyptic language in the first place. It is quite probable this type of imagery was necessary to prevent further persecution of the church. Imagine if the identity of the beast and false prophet were clearly given in the text. Such a book would certainly fuel more antagonism with the Roman government and would likely be used as an important piece of evidence against the church. In the end, this would likely add to the intensity of the persecutions. Now, let's work our way through the text pertaining to the identities of the beast and the false prophet.

Review: In the last chapter we read about the red dragon, whom we are told by John was that ancient serpent of old, the devil, and Satan himself. At the end of chapter 12 he is described as furious and sets his wicked heart on devouring the offspring of the woman—who he identifies as those who testify to Jesus. So how does Satan attack Christians? He hires two henchmen, the beast and the false prophet. In the first two verses we are introduced to henchmen #1—the beast. Not surprisingly—commentators are all over the map when it comes to his identity. The Roman Empire, The Jewish High Priest, The Papacy, George Stalin, Adolph Hitler, and even Ronald Reagan. Many feel the beast is a future person yet to be revealed to us. As I share my view, I really wanted to try to understand this passage through the lenses of the first century church—with the Scriptures as my main support. Here goes.

1 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.

Old Testament Imagery: In the book of Daniel—which was very familiar to the early church, the description of the leopard, the bear, and the lion's mouth, would have instantly led them to recall the three kingdoms that were revealed in Daniel had in his dream. (Daniel 7:3-7; 17, 23). Most scholars would concur that these animals are symbols of the Babylonian kingdom (lion), the Persia – Medes (The bear), and the Grecian kingdom led by Alexander the Great, who conquered the known world in an astounding ten years time (hence, the analogy of the fleet footed leopard). Moreover, Daniel talks about a fourth beast that will be unlike any kingdom ever seen, which describes Rome as a world power that unequaled from the time of Daniel. As a result, this beast—which portrays each of these kingdoms is best understood as a composite of all these powerful kingdoms.

As to the ten horns on the seven heads, Revelation 17:12 states this:

And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.

It seems pretty clear the 10 horns represent 10 future kings that are still yet future from John's time. We can debate who these kings are; but it seems more prudent to focus on the text at hand, namely the reality of first century Christians being persecuted by the Roman government.

Let Scripture Interpret Scripture: In verse 1 we are told two things about the description of the beast—it has 10 horns and seven heads—which obviously is meant to be symbolic. The best way to understand the Bible is to allow it to interpret itself. Look what Revelation 17:8-11 states:

8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. 9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come....

The Identity of the Beast: Here we have an excellent clue as to the identity of this beast. John tells us that the seven heads stand for seven mountains and also are symbolic of seven kings. The first reference (the mountains) is most likely a reference to Imperial Rome because it was always known in antiquity as the city with seven hills. Add to this the fact that Daniel mentions a fourth kingdom like no other and it seems pretty clear the identity of this beast is the Roman Empire, which dominated the Mediterranean world for over a thousand years.

The second reference (seven kings) lets the reader understand that seven kings play an important role in contextualizing this whole event for the first century readers. Moreover, the one *that is*, refers the sixth Emperor because the seventh has yet to come. If you calculate the first seven Emperors the list according to Josephus goes like this: 1. Julius Caesar 2. Augustus 3. Tiberius 4. Caligula 5. Claudius 6. Nero 7. Galba. This would mean that *the one who is* none other than Nero—who initiated the first persecution of the church.

Keep in mind that a direct identification of Nero by John would have been fuel to the fire to intensify the persecutions by the Roman government. Many believe the Book of Revelation was written during the time of the persecution of Nero and I am inclined to agree. There are some strong arguments—but I don't think it really matters in the grand scheme of things. The church was getting persecuted whether under Nero or Domitian (AD 95) during the last years of the century.

There is also another interesting line of evidence which points to the sixth king being Nero—the number 666 mentioned in verse 18. One thing John makes clear is that the person he has in mind is a man and *his* number is 666. There is little question he expected his readers to know who he was referring to. That is why he says the one who has wisdom should calculate the number of the beast. It is pretty clear there is some kind of code his readers would have known. Nero was not talking about a bar code or chip that will be inserted in our skin—he was talking about a specific individual whose identity could be **decoded** at the time of his writing.

In Hebrews there is a numbering system which corresponds to each letter in the alphabet. The first 10 have values that increase from 1-10. The second group each letter represents intervals of 10. (20-90). Finally the third group has intervals of 100 (100-900). When you take the name of Kaiser Neron, as pronounced in the Greek (Caesar Nero) it is transliterated into Hebrew in the following way. Once you add the values for each Hebrew letter the total comes out to 666—the number John mentions in the book. Thus, there is another strong line of evidence suggesting the person John had in mind was none other than Nero.

| Resh (ר) | Samech (ס) | Qof (ק) | Noon (נ) | Vav (ו) | Resh (ר) | Noon (נ) | TOTAL |
|----------|------------|---------|----------|---------|----------|----------|-------|
| 200 | 60 | 100 | 50 | 6 | 200 | 50 | 666 |

The Mortal Wound that was Healed: From here, things get more interesting in the text.

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.

Most Dispensationalists understand this to be a reference to a future individual that will be killed and then come to life again because they read most of Revelation as literal. This idea was presented to Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their enormously popular *Left Behind* series where Nicholas Carpathia, the future beast, comes back to life. As captivating as that possibility may seem—this would not be how the first century church would have interpreted this. Instead they would have understood this from a completely different perspective. They would have contextualized it.

Now there is something else you should know about Nero besides the fact that he persecuted the Christians. Nero nearly bankrupted the whole Roman Empire because of his extravagant life and building projects. As a response to increasing hostility by the senate, he fled the kingdom and hid in exile. Ultimately he was cornered and committed suicide by thrusting a dagger into his throat. With Nero dead and the empire in financial ruins it appeared the demise of the empire was at hand. It was a great cause of celebration for Christians and others being persecuted under its rule.

But there was a rumor that spread throughout the empire and lasted for around a century or so. Many believed Nero would come back from the dead and take vengeance on his enemies. After Nero, the empire continued to crumble with civil war and unrest. The next three emperors had short reigns and many believed the power of Rome had come to an end. But then something unexpected happened! Rome at the brink of extinction was rebuilt and became even stronger under the leadership of Vespasian. Tacitus describes the events in the following way.

"Many believed the end of the empire was at hand" (Histories 4:5:4) According to Suetonius, to the surprise of the world, "the empire which for a long time had been unsettled and, as it were, drifting through the usurpation and violent death of three emperors, was at last taken in and given stability by the Flavian family" (Vespasian 1: 1).

What Tacitus was saying was that the emperor Vespasian, from the Flavian family, saved the day. He was able to resurrect the empire and make it formidable once again. That is what is meant when John says one of the heads (Nero) suffered a mortal wound; but it was healed and the whole earth marveled and worshipped the beast. In other words, the beast suffered a mortal wound and came back to life.

Unfortunately, Christian persecution continued after Nero with other emperors such as Vespasian and Domitian. But Nero would have always been remembered as the evil figurehead of Rome because he was the first to institute torture on them like had never been administered, get his, for three and a half years (verse 5b). After Rome burned in 64 AD Nero conveniently blamed the Christians whom he saw as a threat to the stability of the empire. Tacitus described the context of the persecutions in this way.

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

So Christians were tortured in ways unimaginable. The only way they could escape the violent deaths was to renounce their faith and worship Caesar! Let's read what John says next.

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; 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.

Rome, a composite of the beast, became dominant again and had control over every tribe, people, and language, all imagery that you find mentioned in the book of Daniel. More significantly, it was allowed to make war on the saints. Emperor worship continued and all those who were not Christians would ultimately commit blasphemy against God. Many people died for their faith and the beast seemed to have prevailed over the Christian God.

Satan has been Defeated: But there are a couple things that are worth mentioning. First, notice verse seven the beast was allowed to make war and conquer the saints. The reality is that Satan and his henchmen *are not* defeating God the Father and his children. No, instead they have been granted authority for a time. So why does God allow this to happen to His children? I believe the answer is found in verses 9-10.

John says if anyone has an ear let him hear that Christians must willingly be taken captive and if necessary be slain for their faith. He wants the saints to endure to the end. Why? Because he has already mentioned that Satan has been defeated and his time is short in the previous chapter. Secondly, because such a display of bravery and confidence in their faith would no doubt capture the attention of onlookers and make them more likely to become Christians themselves. The Greek word for witness is *martys*. A *martys* is a witness for God. You can lead people to Jesus while you are alive or on the brink of death. But when would someone's witness be more convicting? When they see an unshaking confidence in the believer up onto the point of death.

Admittedly it is hard to swallow at times. But as a Christian we are no longer supposed to belong to ourselves. Sometimes God in His sovereignty uses martyred Christians as His vehicle to awaken a deaf world. Make no mistake about it; our world for the most part is deaf when it comes to Jesus. Very often, something major needs to happen before the deaf person can finally hear.

Now you might wonder how does this passage apply to me. Nero was back in the day and I am not being persecuted like those in antiquity. First you have to remember that the kind of persecution John mentions is overt—but equally effective are the more subtle forms. Remember Satan, the dragon, was using Rome to accomplish his purposes. Today he uses the same beast to affect you in more subtle fashion. The primary method usually revolves around the areas of compromise and toleration. Perhaps you are in a relationship where compromise threatens to lessen it from God's standards. Perhaps you have compromised in your work place or business practices? Maybe you have compromised in the way you have devotions with God? The reality is that the things of this world are vying for your affection and encourage compromise for the sake of peace. So maybe you are not bowing down to Caesar but you have instead paid compromise homage. The main concern of the beast is to take the focus off of Jesus.

Secondly, I want to clarify something. I am not suggesting Nero is *the* beast. Instead I am saying that he is a representative of the beast, with its seven heads and ten horns. He is the sixth head of a beast that is a composite of major world armies that have been against God throughout history (Lion, bear, leopard). Rome in that sense is Babylon, Persia, and Greece all rolled up into one.

The 10 future horns represent more powers that will continue to add to this composite. What that means is that this beast is getting stronger with each passing century. So whenever you are encouraged to compromise you must remember that violence is not the only way to get you to bow down to Caesar. Today our society has become more refined and diplomatic in the methods it uses to blaspheme God and to encourage the worship of other gods. The popular message revolves around tolerance. If you are tolerant you are accepted and spared the sword—if you are not—you are disliked and dismissed as someone with a primitive mindset. Yes, the beast has become craftier (which was Satan's description in the garden), just make sure that as you look to avoid the sword—you Christianity does not get absorbed into the cultures norms. In the end, John tells us all will bow down to the beast with one exception; those whose names are written in the book of Life. So let's heed John's exhortation at the end of verse 10. This is John's call to you as you face a more subtle kind of persecution. He ends by saying.....**Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.**

Let us heed this call and persevere!