

Revelation 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Revelation chapter 13 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.

It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 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, 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.

If anyone has an ear, let him hear. 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. Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon.

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. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people.

[1 : 5 4] And by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.

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. 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, 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.

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.

In Revelation chapter 12, there were two signs in heaven, the woman and the dragon. The dragon sought to destroy the woman's son when he was born, but the son was caught up to guard on his throne.

The dragon was then cast down to earth, where he pursued the woman who had given birth to the child, making war upon her and the rest of her children. As he failed in this, at the conclusion of the chapter, he was standing on the sand of the sea, and we were left waiting to see what he would do next.

[3 : 1 2] In chapter 13, a sea beast and a land beast arrive on the scene. Peter Lighthouse observes the very close parallels within the two halves of this chapter, the description of the sea beast and the description of the land beast.

They can be mapped on to each other. These resemblances help us to get a clearer sense of the relationship between these two figures, and between both of them and the dragon who lies behind them.

The land is Israel and its inhabitants. The sea is the realm of the Gentiles. And the dragon begins by trying to attack the woman and her offspring on the land, but he fails, and so he seeks to raise up an enemy for the woman from the sea.

Beast rising up from the sea recalls the book of Daniel, which, once again, lies behind a lot of this chapter of Revelation. Daniel chapter 7 verses 2 to 8 reads,

If we combine the features of these four beasts into a monstrous hybrid of them all, we get the sea beast of Revelation chapter 13.

[5 : 54] It has features of a lion, leopard, and bear, like the first three beasts combined. It has seven heads, the number of the heads of the four beasts of Daniel combined.

It has ten horns, like the fourth beast of Daniel. We should not presume that the beasts of the sea are necessarily bad. Israel had long functioned in a world of larger empires, especially in its exilic and post-exilic history.

These empires had various characters to them. At points, they protected Israel from other powers, whereas at other times, they were like dangerous predators, turning against the people of the land.

The beasts in Daniel's vision in order are Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The sea beast of Revelation also has features of the dragon himself. The dragon was described back in chapter 12 verse 3.

And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems. The sea beast resembles the dragon in having ten horns and seven heads.

[6 : 55] The sea beast is an image or reflection of the dragon himself. He functions as a sort of mini-me for the dragon. The ten diadems presumably connect with kings, and the blasphemous names on the heads contrast both with the seal upon the foreheads of the righteous, and parody the plate on the high priest's forehead, the plate that declares him to be holy to the Lord.

The dragon grants the sea beast his power, his throne, and great authority. In his temptation of Christ in the Gospels, Satan declares that he has the authority and the glory of all the kingdoms of the world, and that he can grant those things to whomever he wills.

Here the dragon grants this authority and power to the monstrous sea beast, which then turns satanic. The beast, as Austin Pharaoh notes, is the anointed of the dragon.

He is a parodic Christ. The father gives his power, throne, and authority to the lamb, and the beast is the satanic counterpart of the lamb. One of the heads of the sea beast receives a mortal wound, a wound from which he later recovers.

This serves as a wonder that leads the whole earth to marvel as they follow the beast. The earth here may refer to the Jews in particular. The mortal wound of the sea beast from which it recovers presents it also as a parody of Christ in that respect.

[8 : 14] This is the beast's death and resurrection. We should also recall the prophecy that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15. Here the dragon's seed, the sea beast, has its head ominously wounded.

The prophecy of Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 has been very much in the background throughout this and the preceding chapter, with the woman, her appointed seed, the rest of her offspring, the serpent, and his seed, all the way throughout the story.

What the mortal wound could be is not entirely clear. Both Lightheart and Farrah suggest that the head that is mortally wounded could be understood to be the first head of the beast.

Many commentators see the figure of Nero in the mortally wounded head. Nero's death is followed by a period in which it might seem that the beast of Rome has been mortally wounded, yet the beast goes on to recover and to gain worship for it.

Whatever event is in view here, it seems to involve an apparently fatal blow to Rome, from which it then recovers. Lighthouse suggests that the mortally wounded head is the first head of Julius Caesar himself.

[9 : 21] The heads aren't individual kings, but kingdoms. After the death of Julius Caesar, it might have seemed that it was the end for imperial Rome, before it had fully established itself, perhaps even the end for Rome itself.

The seeming resurrection of the beast leads people to worship it, asking who is like the beast, and perhaps there's a subtle play here on the name Michael, which means who is like God.

In the worship of the beast, we are seeing Israel enthralled to the beast of Rome, and perhaps also something of emperor worship playing out over the wider empire. The beast utters blasphemies and exercises authority for 42 months.

This is connected with the 42 months, the time, times, and half a time, and the 1260 days mentioned elsewhere in the book. This is the period of the two witnesses and of the trampling of the holy city.

It's the period of time as a period of persecution, likely during Nero's reign. The sea beast is granted authority during this period. The speaking of blasphemy should also remind us of Daniel chapter 7 again.

[10 : 28] The dragon brought up the sea beast from the waters of the sea, and now we meet, at the end of the chapter, a corresponding beast on the land. If the sea beast is a Gentile beast, associated with Rome, this is a Jewish beast that corresponds to and is related to it.

It's a beast allied with the sea beast, a beast that acts on the sea beast's behalf. This beast has two horns. Perhaps these are related to the king and the priest, the two key figures of power within Israel.

If this were the case, perhaps we should see a reference to Herod and his people, and to the high priest and those around him. This beast is also like a lamb, and it makes an image for the sea beast.

Once again, we see elements of this beast that serve as a parody of Christ. This is an antichrist type figure. The land beast functions as a sort of prophetic figure, and he will later be identified as the false prophet in chapter 19, verse 20.

At first glance, he seems to exercise the power of Elijah, calling down fire from heaven. Yet he is a false prophet. Although he looks like a lamb, his voice is that of the dragon.

[11 : 38] Once again, behind this figure, this land beast, is the great dragon himself. This figure is ultimately satanically controlled. And a fourth thing comes into view here, the image of the beast.

Whatever the image of the beast is, this land beast gives breath to it. Here we can see a sort of parodic trinity. The father is the dragon figure. The son is the sea beast, who is given a throne, authority and power.

And the land beast is like the spirit. This false spirit type character is one that is a false prophet, and also a figure that gives false breath. The image here might remind us of Ezekiel chapter 37, where Ezekiel prophesied to the dry bones, and the breath comes into them and they rise up.

This, however, is a sort of false Pentecost, a false giving of the spirit and breath, a false people that's being formed as a sort of inverse of the church. Here then, with the land beast, there is a false Israel being formed, a counterfeit church that is being formed not in loyalty to God, but in loyalty to the sea beast, to Rome that is persecuting the saints.

The land beast requires people to have the mark of the sea beast on their right hand and their forehead. Marks on the right hand and forehead would remind us of the placement of the law in phylacteries.

[12 : 57] This is also an alternative to the marking out of the servants of God upon their foreheads. The land beast, the false prophet that speaks with the voice of the dragon, is a false Israel that's being formed around the powers within the land.

The demand of this mark, if people are to buy and sell, seems to be a reference to the sacrificial economy of the worship of the temple. That becomes bound up with a commitment to the land beast, to the sea beast, and behind them both, to the dragon.

The chapter ends with one of the most debated verses in the whole book, concerning the number of the beast. The number of the beast is not, as some have supposed, 666, but 666.

It's the number of a man, and many people have seen the solution here to lie in some sort of gematria, which assigns numbers to different letters of the alphabet. This can apply both in Greek and also in Hebrew.

Many different suggestions have been put forward by different interpreters of the book. A popular suggestion is that this is a reference to Nero. Yet, as in a number of other cases, identifying this number as the number of Nero requires a very particular way of writing Nero's name, which perhaps weakens the claim to a connection.

[14 : 11] That said, an alternative reading of this text, as 616, might strengthen the connection with Nero, as an alternative rendering of his name would have that as the numerical value.

Stepping back and looking at some of the numerical qualities of the number reveals some further possibilities. First of all, the Greek gematria for Jesus' name is 888.

In 666, we might see a parody of that. 888 might make us think of the eighth day, which is the day of new creation. 666 is more associated with the sixth day, the day of the creation of man.

It is also the 36th triangular number. This might contrast with the square and cubic numbers used elsewhere in the book for more holy things. 666 is also two-thirds of a thousand.

One thousand is a cubic number, ten by ten by ten, and communicates completeness. But 666 is that complete number minus a third.

[15 : 17] In both the blowing of the trumpets, and the dragon's descent from heaven, taking down a third of the stars with him, there has been the removal of a third from a whole number. Maybe this is some allusion to that.

Finally, in scripture, the number 666 is associated with a critical moment within the narrative. In 1 Kings 10, verse 14, it is 666 talents of gold that Solomon brings in in a single year.

This might seem a very strange connection to draw, but this verse is a very important one within the story of 1 Kings. In the story of 1 Kings up to that point, Solomon has been experiencing this meteoric rise of his kingdom.

At the very height of his kingdom, the Queen of Sheba has just visited. In the preceding verse, she had just gone back to her own people. In verse 14, however, everything starts to curdle.

First we see Solomon accumulating too much gold. Then we see Solomon going to Egypt to get chariots and horses. And then he multiplies wives and turns away from the Lord. There were three laws that were given to the king in Deuteronomy.

[16 : 23] Three things that the king was not supposed to do. And in these verses, Solomon breaks each one of these laws in succession. His heart turns away from the Lord. And from what is arguably the greatest point in its history, Israel descends into a new sort of captivity.

Not long after, the kingdom is divided. And from the glories of Solomon's reign, it descends in a most lamentable way. In that number, 666, we have the first indication of the fall of Solomon.

And now in this beast, there is another indication of fallen kingship. The meaning of the number, 666 then, is likely a combination of these different things.

As in a great number of the symbols and images of the book of Revelation, the heroes are expected to observe a great many different correlations and connotations of the images that are presented.

A question to consider. How might the parodic trinity and church of the dragon, the sea-beast, the land-beast, and the image of the beast, help us better to understand the nature of the dragon's kingdom?

[17:27]

