

The Book of Revelation, also called the Revelation to John, possibly had an author named John, or perhaps Johanan, the ancient Hebrew version of John (HarperCollins 2307). Originally, scholars assumed that the author of the Gospel and Letters of John, John the son of Zebedee, a member of the twelve apostles, also wrote the Book of Revelation, but currently this assumption is negated as a result of evidence within the author's writing (HarperCollins 2307). For example, the author of the Book of Revelation writes with a different literary style and emphasizes different religious ideas (HarperCollins 2307). Many scholars believe that John, the author of the Book of Revelation, was a member of the Johannine community at one point in his life, and because of his frequent references to the Old Testament, especially the Book of Daniel, he came from a Jewish background (HarperCollins 2307). Also, he was probably born in Palestine and later traveled to Asia Minor to seek refuge from the first Jewish Revolt against Rome (HarperCollins 2307). Due to his prophetic writings and his vast knowledge of the seven Christian communities, displayed within his writings, he considered himself and was considered by many a Christian prophet (HarperCollins 2307). In short, John was a formerly Jewish, now Christian prophet of the Johannine community and originally from Palestine and was respected as a prophet by his community members.

John wrote the Book of Revelation between the years 64 and 96 C.E. (HarperCollins 2308). John writes, "Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, 'Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there'", so it is assumed that the temple was still standing when the book was written, and therefore the date of authorship was before 70 C.E. (Revelation 11:1 & HarperCollins

2308). However, John uses the name “Babylon” to represent Rome many times in the Book of Revelation, and this label was not used until after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E. (HarperCollins 2308). Perhaps the book was written in sections and compiled over a number of years (HarperCollins 2308).

John’s target audience was most likely Christians, who were at that time being persecuted by Rome for their religious beliefs (HarperCollins 2308). The constant representation of Rome as a beast that blasphemies God and Heaven alludes to the fact that Rome was a God-opposing power in the world and therefore persecuted those who worshipped him (Knight 95).

Although the Book of Revelation has many opposing interpretations and several different themes, it has a couple of common purposes that remain the same despite the interpretation. First, one purpose of the apocalypse is to explain “That men and woman are so constituted as to worship some absolute power, and if they do not worship the true and real Power behind the universe, they will construct a god for themselves and give allegiance to that” (Metzger 77). In other words, human beings have a natural instinct to seek a meaning for life and an explanation for everything in the universe that they cannot comprehend or understand at first sight, and it is easiest to blame these mystifying things on a being of great importance, a person of great political power or a god within the heavens, who can answer or pretend to answer these great questions. Also, another common purpose of the Book of Revelation, perhaps the most important, is to describe the idea that God has the power to intervene in history to justify and reward the children of God and punish and eradicate those who persecute them (HarperCollins 2309). In order to validate that different interpretations support these common purposes of the text,

three different interpretations of chapter thirteen of the Book of Revelation will be explored: an allegorical interpretation, a historical interpretation, and a prophetic interpretation.

The passage that will be dissected and explained gives descriptions of two beasts that have been empowered by a dragon (Revelation 13). The first beast comes from the sea and has ten horns and seven heads (Revelation 13:1). The beast from the sea is a mixture between a leopard, a bear, and a lion and has a healed mortal-wound (Revelation 13:2-3). This beast blasphemies God and makes war on saints, and every person who is not predestined to spend eternity in Heaven follows and worships him (Revelation 13:5-8). The second beast comes from the earth and has characteristics of a lamb and a dragon, and it makes all people worship the first beast (Revelation 13:11-12). It performs great signs in order to deceive the people of the world and requires that the mark of the beast be portrayed by all people in order to buy or sell (Revelation 13:13-17). Lastly, the author states that the number of the beast is 666, the number of a person (Revelation 13:18).

In the overall context of the Book of Revelation, chapter thirteen is responsible for depicting the beings and the actions of the beings that will eventually lead their followers against God and finally lead to the end of the world (Revelation 13). This chapter is also important in the overall context because it presents two very important ideas, the mark of the beast and the number of the beast, whose meanings have been debated and analyzed for hundreds of years.

Chapter thirteen has a cause and effect relationship with the chapter directly before it (Revelation 12 and Revelation 13). In chapter twelve, “The Woman, the Child,

and the Dragon”, the dragon wants to devour the child that the woman has just given birth to, but God protects them both, so the dragon starts a war in Heaven but loses and is cast down to Hell (Revelation 12:1-7). Then Satan casts the dragon down to the earth where he tries to go after the woman again, but God and the earth protect her, and so the dragon decides to wage war on her children and all of those who believe in Jesus and God (Revelation 12:7-13). Chapter thirteen portrays the means in which the dragon attempts to seek revenge on the woman and God by deceiving their children, and therefore chapter twelve is the cause of chapter thirteen (Revelation 13). Chapter thirteen relates to chapter fourteen by a simple chronology of events (Revelation 13 & Revelation 14). First, in chapter fourteen, “The Lamb and the 144,000”, John lists the characteristics of those who are predestined to spend eternity in Heaven, and then three angels tell of the punishment that will be received by those who worship the beasts (Revelation 14).

The actual passage described above does not appear in any of the Gospels, but some of its underlying ideas do. For example, since the beasts and their blasphemies represent Rome and its blasphemies, any passage in the Synoptic Gospels that portrays the persecution of Jesus and Christians by Rome and the fault of his death to Rome, show examples of why chapter thirteen of Revelation portrays the beasts the way it does (Knight 95). An example of this takes place in Matthew where Pilate says, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves” and hands Jesus over to the Jews who crucify him (Matthew 27:24). Also, Matthew portrays an image of the Roman soldiers mocking and disgracing Jesus (Revelation 27:29-30). “After twisting some thorns into a crown, they [Roman soldiers] put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ They spat on him, and took the reed and

struck him on the head” (Matthew 27:29-30). It is passages like these that also appear in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John that portray the political officials of Rome blaspheming Jesus, and therefore blaspheming God and heaven, that liken Rome and its political officials to the beasts of Revelation (Mark, Luke, & John). Although the particular passage describing the beasts in Revelation does not have much to do with Corinthians or the teachings of Paul, the apocalyptic ideas of Revelation are very similar to those of Corinthians (Corinthians). One of the most important beliefs of the community of Corinth, a belief that was also important in the other Christian communities, but much more in Paul’s, was the idea that the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world would take place within the next few years (Corinthians). Because of these apocalyptic beliefs that governed Paul’s community of Corinth, Corinthians relates very closely with Revelation in their prophetic themes.

In order to understand chapter thirteen of Revelation, it is important for the reader to explore the symbolic meanings of certain verses within the passage. First of all, most scholars and writers who take an allegorical approach to Revelation state that the first beast, the beast from the sea represents the Roman Empire. For example, “It is clear that this first beast is a symbol of Rome”, and “The heads evidently denote a sequence of emperors (Knight 97). Knight also explains that the wounded head of the first beast that has healed can be seen to represent either the Emperor Caligula, who recovered from a life-threatening illness during his rule, or more likely, the Emperor Nero, stemming from a common belief that he would return from hiding in the East or as a spirit or ghost after his death (Knight 97). HarperCollins’ Bible Dictionary states that the beast from the sea in Revelation symbolizes the Roman Empire (Achteimeier 110). Metzger also states that

the beast from the sea symbolizes the Roman Empire who was seen as “the embodiment of Antichrist” and “a world power in opposition to the reign of Christ” in John’s time (Metzger 75). Another source states that the earliest readers of the Book of Revelation saw the beast as the Roman Empire or even Nero (Collins 91). Again, the beast is said to represent Rome in “A Beastly Coalition” (Baldinger 446). Secondly, it is important to comprehend the meaning behind “the mark of the beast” without which no person may buy or sell. According to the HarperCollins’ Bible Dictionary, the mark of the beast represents the mark of the official imperial seal which was necessary to conduct business in the empire and would often be found on money (Achte-meier 652). Some writers believe that this idea could have meant a type of branding which was very common at that time and used to portray ownership of slaves or displaying religious beliefs, but it was most likely an abstract idea that warned Christians not to have economic contact with a pagan society (Knight 100). Although this idea makes sense, the mark of the beast most likely represents coins that contained the names and images of emperors and often showed titles of divinity (Metzger 76). This representation seems much more logical since coins and money were required for the buying and selling of goods (Metzger 76). Lastly, an important symbol to understand in Revelation thirteen is the number of the beast or “666”. In the ancient practice of “gematria”, words contained numerical values because the letters of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets each corresponded to a number, and by adding the numbers of each letter in a person’s name or a simple word, the numerical value could be found (Bauckham 384 & 385). The numbers that correspond to the Hebrew letters used to spell “Caesar Neron” add up to 666 leading most people to believe that the number of the beast stands for the number of Nero, therefore making

Nero the beast (Collins 97). In short, although “the beast from the sea”, “the mark of the beast”, and “the number of the beast” can be interpreted differently and have different valid meanings, which will be explored later, most scholars retain these representations of these three ideas.

When exploring a topic as broad and mystifying as the meaning of the beasts and their characteristics in Revelation, it is difficult to believe that everyone takes a similar approach when interpreting its passages. There are three main approaches that writers take when discussing their interpretations of chapter thirteen of the Book of Revelation. The three approaches, allegorical, historical, and prophetic, each have their own unique characteristics, but each support the common purposes and themes of the book: that human beings will worship a god or being who has the ability to present answers to mysteries because of a human instinct and that God will reward those who worship him and punish those who oppress his followers and blasphemy Him (Metzger 77 & HarperCollins 2309). First, the most common approach to Revelation is an allegorical one, where the story contains many symbols and is somewhat fictional in order to present a moral or lesson for the reader. In an allegorical view, the author often sees the beast from the sea as the Roman Empire that is opposed to Christ’s reign (Metzger 75). The beast’s blasphemies against God are seen as the common practice of deification of Roman emperors that started during the reign of Julius Caesar (Metzger 75). Roman emperors required that the inhabitants of the land they ruled treat them like gods during their lifetimes and after their deaths and often ordered temples to be built to honor them (Metzger 75). Also, “the mark of the beast”, according to symbolic writers, represents coins that bore the pictures and deifying titles of emperors on them and were required to

participate in economic practices (Metzger 76). The actual details of John's writings, where the mark of the beast is placed on the right hand or forehead of followers, are considered to be figurative statements (Metzger 76). The purpose of the symbolic language is not to teach readers of a past event or to warn readers of an ominous event of the future, but to encourage them "To see the surrounding world as hostile, not friendly, and to keep a wary distance from it" (Knight 96). Also, these symbols serve to warn Christians "That friendship with the world means the service of God-opposing powers" (Knight 97). The passages also criticize the way in which Rome had control over the civilized world and the way in which rulers were worshipped and idolized in order to warn Christians against worshipping anything or anyone other than God (Knight 99). In brief, the allegorical approach to chapter thirteen of the Book of Revelation serves to caution Christians against following or worshipping any organization or person that claim to be divine or have power and control. While warning Christians of this danger, the book still manages to portray its overall purpose that it is human nature to find something or someone responsible for the universe and that God will intervene to punish or reward those who deserve the proper consequence.

Secondly, some writers choose to take the historical approach to interpreting the meaning and characteristics of the beasts. Some scholars believe that the ideas that are portrayed in chapter thirteen have the same meanings and representations that they have in an allegorical approach, but they serve a different purpose. Instead of trying to warn Christians, scholars believe the story attempts to remind Christians of the past and display a history of Christian events. For example, Albert H. Baldinger states that, "More than a review of the past or a preview of the future, it is a super-view of the course of Christian

history” (Baldinger 444). The sea from which the beast rises symbolizes “The storm-tossed sea of international life, repeatedly swept with contrary winds, formenting parties, leagues, alliances, and endless wars” and it “Lifts empires on its crest only to sink them one after another in the ocean of oblivion” (Baldinger 445). This beast not only represents the Roman Empire, but any political power or civil government that governs with rules that rebuke God and transgresses against his children (Baldinger 446). The beast from the sea has governed throughout history as Egypt during Moses’ time, as Assyria in Isaiah’s time, as Babylon when Jeremiah lived, as Rome during the days of Jesus, as Spain during the Inquisition, as Russia during the Communist era, and as Germany during World War II (Baldinger 446). The story of the beasts is a simple, symbolic basis of what has happened over and over again throughout history; perhaps a recipe for a government that causes strife and persecution in terms of religion. Also, as in the recent histories of Germany and Russia, “Wherever and whenever a pagan government and a false religion, or a godless government and a Christless church, have been merged under one head or controlled by one authority, the results have always been similar to those John describes, the degradation of both religion and the state, irresponsible autocracy, and the perpetration of fearful injustices” (Baldinger 448). In this case, John does not warn his readers about future events that may lead to the end of the world or about worshipping something or someone besides God, but instead he says that people should learn from history and try to avoid the mistakes that have led to the persecution of the Christian religion and the persecution of God’s people. While teaching about this history, the text still manages to uphold the purposes reviewed earlier.

Lastly, some liberal scholars take a completely prophetic approach to the passages involving the beasts. Baldinger believes that chapter thirteen is “A prophecy of things to come” (Baldinger 444). After listing the empires that the beast from the sea has represented in the past, from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich, Baldinger states, “That the beast will emerge again as history unfolds may be taken as reasonably certain, where and when is anybody’s guess” (Baldinger 446). Clearly, Baldinger, along with countless other authors, scholars, and fanatics, view chapter thirteen and the rest of the Book of Revelation as a warning of a future Armageddon. They do not see a warning against governments that withhold religious rights and discourage belief in Jesus or a teaching of historical events but a prophecy of how the world will end. Baldinger even asks rhetorical questions about how Christians should handle the rule of the beast as if it is very near in the future, proving that he believes and all Christians should believe that the end is coming eventually (Baldinger 446). While serving as a prophecy of future events, chapter thirteen still manages to alert the reader of its main purposes: that people will follow a leader and treat him as a god willingly if he has the correct answers to their questions and that God will punish and reward those as warranted.

Since chapter thirteen, as well as the rest of Revelation, is so perplexing, there are innumerable ways of interpreting the different ideas described. One of the most disagreed upon ideas in chapter thirteen is the meaning of the second beast. A very common compromise to this argument is the idea that the second beast, the beast from the earth, is the antichrist or “A false prophet who acts in imitation of the Messiah” (Knight 99). “Its miracles deceive people in making an image of the first beast” which persuades people to worship the first beast, disobeying the Ten Commandments (Knight 99). Other

scholars believe the beast from the earth symbolizes the Roman governors or political authorities under the government of Rome (Collins 95). The beast represents two different ideas under this symbol: the agents of the ruling emperor and the priests who performed the rituals of the emperor (Collins 95). Both of these ideas represent different ways in which Christians were persecuted or Christ was denied. Another disagreement among scholars is the meaning of “the number of the beast”. Although it is a general belief that the number of the beast, 666, stands for the addition of the Hebrew letters of Caesar Nero, some think that since the number seven “symbolizes plentitude and completeness” and the number six symbolizes “incompleteness, imperfection, and even evil”, the number of the beast must stand for the fact that the beast is evil (Collins 97). Also, some ancient texts of Revelation state that the number of the beast is 616 instead of 666 so some scholars disagree that this symbol stands for the numeric symbol of Nero’s name (Metzger 76). However, when the numbers of the name “Neron Caesar”, another name for Nero, are added up, the final sum is 666, but when omitting the last n in “Neron”, the number 616 is obtained (Metzger 77). In conclusion, although these disagreements about the identities of characters and the meanings of ideas in chapter thirteen of the Book of Revelation may never be solved, they do continue to provide readers with a symbolic, historical, or prophetic view of the story; however they choose to interpret it.

In conclusion, I believe I have learned most from chapter thirteen of Revelation that the Book of Revelation is not just a prophecy of the end of the world. All my life, when I had read or learned about Revelation, I must have been reading from the most liberal sources, because I always thought that Revelation was the story of how the world

was going to end some day. After researching the passage of the beasts from the sea and the earth, I realized that Revelation has no absolute, concrete meaning or interpretation. The way it is interpreted is completely up to the person reading the text. Also, now that I have researched this topic, the allegorical approach seems much more logical and makes much more sense than the prophetic approach. For example, it seems much more valid that the mark of the beast required to buy or sell be a coin or money rather than a tattoo or branding. Also, I now know where the evil connotation to the number 666 comes from. I always assumed that somewhere in the Bible, there was a passage that said that the number 666 was the number of Satan and Hell, but now I know that it is more likely the numeric value of the Hebrew translation of Caesar Nero's name. When I first chose this topic, I expected to be writing a paper about how the Bible predicts the world will end, but now I know that it is much less literal and much more symbolic than that, and I believe this realization will help me to have more of an open mind in all areas of study in the future.

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