

“Men Worshiped the Dragon”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 19

Texts: Revelation 13:1-10; Daniel 3:1-15

Know your enemy,” has long been a maxim of military strategy. It is also, apparently, a maxim of the apostle John. Throughout the Book of Revelation, John has been describing the nature of spiritual warfare to which God’s people are called. From the attempts of Satan to deceive the church through false teaching, to his attempted seduction of the church by the harlot, John has repeatedly warned us about the tactics of our enemy. Now in Revelation 13, John warns us about our greatest enemy, the satanically empowered beast who wages war upon the saints.

In Revelation 12, we come to yet another scene in John’s apocalyptic vision in which he describes the period of time between Christ’s first advent and his second coming from a new theological vantage point. Unlike prior visions of the seal and trumpet judgments—which depicted God as sending a series of woes upon the earth—this time John’s focus is upon the seven main characters who participate in the great drama of redemption. The drama described in Revelation 12-14, includes heavenly and earthly scenes, and depicts the nature of the spiritual conflict between the kingdom of God and the geo-political kingdoms of Satan. The characters mentioned in this section of Revelation include the dragon (who is Satan), the woman (the Israel of God) the beast (the satanically empowered state), the false prophet (the spokesman for the beast), the 144,000 (the church upon the earth) the three angelic announcers of Revelation 14:6-13, and the Son of Man, whose return to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new is depicted in the latter part of Revelation 14 (vv. 14-20).

Recall that in Revelation 12, John has already introduced us to two of these seven characters, the woman and the dragon. Since the woman has twelve stars on her head, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel, the woman represents Israel and the people of God. As we have seen, there are a number of Old Testament passages which speak of the nation of Israel as the metaphorical bride of her redeemer-husband (Israel’s Messiah), who will remove Israel’s barrenness and give to his bride countless spiritual children. It is Israel who gives birth to the Messiah—the gospels stress that the virgin is able to trace her ancestry back to Abraham—as well as to all those Jews who embrace the Messiah through faith.

The second character introduced by John is the dragon (Satan) who seeks to destroy the woman’s child, (the Messiah), before turning on the woman herself. This is yet another battle in the on-going war between the seed of the woman and the serpent which first began in Eden after the Fall of Adam, when the Lord God announced Satan’s final defeat even as conflict was just getting underway. In this vision, Satan is described as a hideous dragon, symbolic of his ferocity. His ten horns are symbolic of those kingdoms which arise throughout this age which do the dragon’s bidding, namely, persecuting Christ’s church. The seven heads and the seven crowns represent those kings who lead these kingdom and who swear allegiance to Satan. The number seven is symbolic of the fact that Satan’s kingdom is spread throughout the whole world and is a deliberate and blasphemous attempt to mimic the kingdom of God.

Despite the dragon’s ferocity and apparent power—his tail sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky, which is an echo from Daniel 8, where a great and blasphemous kingdom spreads throughout the world, growing so large as to displace part of the heavens—the dragon is unable devour the woman’s child, because God protects the woman, spiriting her and her child away to a safe place in the wilderness. Satan may be fierce, he may be powerful, but he is a creature, and therefore, subject to the will of God.

But when the Messiah is born to the woman, Satan suffers a great defeat. John describes this as a war in heaven, the result of which is that Satan no longer has access to the throne of God, where he has been bringing accusations against the saints. The Devil is now cast down to the earth where he leads the whole world astray. He is enraged because he knows his time is short and his doom is certain. Lashing out, he attacks the woman once again, who after giving birth to the Messiah, now represents the true Israel of God, the church of Jesus Christ. In order to protect the woman for the 1,260 days (this present age), God gives her wings of an eagle, symbolism taken directly from God's preservation of the people of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt, when the people crossed safely through the Red Sea on dry ground, and when they began their journey through the wilderness.

Having been cast down, the Devil now attacks the woman with a torrent of lies, depicted in apocalyptic symbolism as a great flood which spews from the mouth of the Serpent, who is the father of lies, and who attempts to imitate the Son of Man, who speaks forth the very word of God. But instead of sweeping the woman away with his deceit, miraculously, the earth opens and swallows up this river of satanic lies, thereby protecting the woman from the Devil's futile efforts. All of these images are drawn directly from the Old Testament, (passages such as Numbers 16:31-33 where ground opened and swallowed Korah and his men) and graphically remind us that the church, like Israel, is in the midst of our own Exodus from captivity to the guilt and power of sin, to the glorious freedom that awaits the children of God in the New Jerusalem where there is no longer any curse, or hint or trace of human sin.

John's point is that God has not left his people on their own. Having heard the word of woe—a warning to the whole earth of the impending judgment soon to come—God's people flee from the city of man (Babylon the Great), before it is destroyed when the seventh and final trumpet sounds on the day of judgment. The church of the New Testament is very much like Israel of the Old Testament. For we must make our way through the wilderness of this present evil age, all the while longing to enter the heavenly city. And like Israel, we must depend in faith upon God to provide us with everything we need, from streams of living water, to the heavenly bread which sustains us on our way. Were it not for God's protection of the church from the rage of the Dragon, Satan would consume us with a torrent of lies. But twice frustrated in his efforts to consume the woman, the Devil seeks other avenues of attack, and so John now introduces the next two characters in the redemptive historical drama, the beast and the false prophet, the agents of Satan, and who together with their master form an unholy and counterfeit Trinity.¹

But in Revelation 12, John leaves us with a very solemn warning. In verse 17, John tells us that “*Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.*” Therefore, in Revelation 13, John will tell us how this happens by introducing the third of seven principle characters in the redemptive drama, the beast, about whom we read, wages war on the saints.

As we turn to our text this morning, Revelation 13:1-10, we come to one of the most interesting—and dare, I say most sensational—passages in all the Book of Revelation. It is also one of the most misinterpreted. So, rather than hurry through the whole chapter in one sermon, we will take time our time, and cover this chapter in some detail. If we are called the face the beast and engage him in spiritual warfare, it certainly behooves us to know all that we can about him.

Before we look at the text itself, however, I need to reissue my word of warning about context. In

¹ See Poythress, [The Returning King](#), 16 ff.

Revelation 13:18, John tells us that understanding these things correctly, “*calls for wisdom.*” This is, in part, a reference to the fact that many in John’s original audience were Jews, who were thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament. I have no doubt that upon hearing John’s apocalyptic vision read aloud in the churches, the minds of these Jewish Christians were immediately filled with Old Testament texts which provide the context for John’s vision and the key to rightly understand his highly symbolic language. I face the question preparing every one of these sermons, “what Old Testament text do I choose for the Old Testament lesson?” because virtually every line in this vision refers—directly or indirectly—to one or more Old Testament passages. People who knew the Old Testament knew exactly what John was talking about.

But John’s call for wisdom also entails something else. Not only is the Old Testament the main part of the context, and certainly the key to understanding the symbols that he uses, but John also writes against the backdrop of a very large and very pagan god-hating world empire—Rome, an empire which was also predicted by one of Israel’s prophets, Daniel. It seems to me that John is asking his reader not only to think about how Jesus Christ fulfills the Old Testament passages to which John refers, he also asks his audience to then make the connection between Christ’s fulfillment of these things and how they are currently playing out before their very eyes in the Roman empire, as seen for example in the struggles of the seven churches to whom John was originally writing.

In other words, once Christ has come and fulfilled the expectations of Israel’s prophets, the long anticipated messianic age has begun. With the coming of the Messiah, the struggle between Satan and the people of God takes on new dimensions as we enter the final chapters of the story of redemption. The context we must keep in mind then, is God’s victory over Satan when Christ dies upon the cross for our sins and is raised for our justification. But the question remains, “How does Christ’s victory over Satan relate to the on-going struggle with the godless nations who persecute the church?” John’s answer has been stated repeatedly. Because of Christ’s victory on Calvary and in the Garden Tomb, the final outcome is certain, even though the consummation of all things has not yet come. This is why John has repeatedly spoken of the church in two senses, as victorious in heaven—the church triumphant—and as a struggling church upon the earth—the church militant. This is why John warns us that even though we must face the beast, we do so with the certain and final victory yet to come firmly in our minds.

The historical context is the manifestation of the beast in John’s day—imperial Rome, with her emperor cult, and her economic and military domination of much of the ancient world. In the Book of Revelation, then, the Roman empire itself becomes a symbol of all those god-hating empires and their self-deifying leaders which follow in her wake. In other words, the Roman Empire is fourth beast of Daniel’s prophecy, and the beast who comes out of the sea as described by John and empowered by the Dragon. But Rome is also a picture to the saints in subsequent ages of all those satanic kingdoms which will raise again and again throughout the course of this age, bent upon waging war on the saints.

But the question we face—and for which we must seek God’s wisdom to answer correctly—is to identify the manifestation of the beast in our own age, as well as weigh the possibility of whether or not a final beast will arise in the days immediately before Christ’s return, a beast which will make the Roman Empire and its persecution of the church pale by comparison. And that is a question, which barring knowledge of the future course of world events and the date of our Lord’s return, we cannot fully answer. Revelation does not predict future events with the precision we would like. But John does lay out the way in which Satan works and he reminds us of those weapons we must use against him, namely the law and the gospel.

In Daniel 3, our Old Testament lesson, we see what it means for the beast to persecute the people of God, when we read of three young Hebrew men who are cast into a fiery furnace because they refuse to worship the image erected by King Nebuchadnezzar. God protects them because they remain faithful unto death. The other Old Testament image which comes to mind is one we have already mentioned, the four kingdoms described in Daniel 7, which represent the four great empires of the ancient world—the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Greek Empire and then finally, the beast of John's day, which is Rome. It is significant that John describes the beast of his day as having ten horns and seven kings, making Rome the apocalyptic symbol all of those satanic kingdoms which will arise to persecute the church until Christ returns.²

In verse 1 of chapter 13, John's vision is again quite dramatic. *"And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea."* In the ancient world, the sea was considered the home of monsters, it was a place of storm and tempest and was particularly frightening to a people who had never seen a world map, much less a satellite photo of the earth. The sea is a fitting symbol for the abyss to which Satan has been cast down.³ As the home of the Dragon, it is also that place from whence comes the prime agent of Satan, the beast. As John simply says, *"I saw a beast coming out of the sea,"* connecting the beast (Rome) directly to dragon (Satan). The beast *"had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name."* It is vital to notice how the beast virtually mirrors the Dragon as John has depicted him in the previous chapter (Revelation 12:3): *"enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads."* The similarity between these two indicates that the beast draws its power directly from Satan and serves as his chief tormentor of Christ's church.

That the beast is a Satanically empowered empire is clear in verse 2, when John connects the beast who comes out of the sea directly to the fourth beast of the vision recorded in the seventh chapter of the prophecy of Daniel. Says John, *"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."* In Daniel 7:7, the prophet spoke of a fourth beast which was *"terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns."* While Daniel prophesied of this beast in connection with the dawn of the messianic age some six hundred years yet in the future, John speaks of this same beast as a present reality. The letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3, tell us that the beast is even then persecuting the Saints.

And just like the beast of Daniel 7 which spoke boastful words against God, so too, we learn in verses 5-6 of Revelation 13 that this beast was *"given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months,"* which, as we have seen, is the entire church age. Furthermore, *"he opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven."* God has sealed his people on the earth with the name of Christ (the 144,000) protecting them from his own wrath. God protects the church (the woman) from Satan by hiding his people in the wilderness. Enraged at being cast from heaven, and twice frustrated in his attack upon the woman, Satan now seeks revenge upon the people of God through the agency of the another—the beast. And so doing the Devil's bidding, the beast rises from the sea, and like his master the Dragon, he blasphemes God and his church throughout the entire inter-advental age.

² Poythress, The Returning King, 138-139.

³ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 187.

But since the beast is empowered by Satan, he seeks the very same things the Devil does, namely to receive the worship of the peoples of the earth unto himself. In order to deceive the whole world, the beast now imitates the power of God, specifically the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In verse 3, we read, “*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.*” The resurrection of beast must be seen against the historical background of John’s own age and the so-called “Nero myth.”

The Roman emperor Nero—one of the most notorious and evil figures of the ancient world—at first was indifferent to Christianity, but later on became violently opposed to it, probably putting both Paul and Peter to death in Rome, along with countless other Christian martyrs. Nero was a vain man, and completely preoccupied with personal luxury. He quickly bankrupted the imperial treasury and then confiscated land and property from the nobles so as to continue his spending. He was also a violent man and killed his pregnant wife (who was no saint), by kicking her in the stomach. But he was falsely suspected of starting the horrible fire which for six days burned much of the city of Rome during the summer of A.D. 64. In order to deflect criticism from himself, instead he blamed the Christians in the city for starting the fire, many of whom, subsequently, he had tortured by turning them into human torches.⁴

After he committed suicide in A.D. 68 at only thirty years of age, rumors spread throughout the Roman empire that Nero was still alive and that he had gone into hiding in some remote part of the empire. Rumors spread that he would soon return to take revenge upon all those who cast aspersions on him once they thought him dead. There were even wild rumors that Nero would come back to life or had already been raised from the dead. Although he was hated in Rome, Nero was admired throughout much of the empire, perhaps explaining why these rumors spread so rapidly. The Jews living in Rome compared Nero with the little horn of Daniel’s prophecy and identified him as the Antichrist, an evil figure whom the Jews believed would arise in the days immediately before the appearance of the Messiah. A number of Christians followed suit, hence the connection often made between the beast and the Antichrist which exists to this day.⁵

In any case, Nero Caesar figures prominently in John’s teaching about the beast and his persecution of the church. Nero is the historical backdrop against which all subsequent self-deifying persecutors of the church must be measured. If we want to know what the beast will be like, we look to Caesar Nero and the Roman empire under his rule.

This point is even more significant in light of the fact that in Romans 13 (written by Paul in the mid-50’s of the first century), Paul calls the very same Roman government a minister of God. But by the time John writes Revelation (near the end of the first century), Nero began the persecution of the church and moved the empire further down the road to the deification of the Roman emperor. Therefore, between the time of Paul and of John (30 some odd years), Satan had transformed a pagan Gentile empire which was largely indifferent to Christianity, into a ten-horned, seven-headed beast, which wages war upon the saints and is led by men who consider themselves divine, and who demand worship from their subjects.

But what about John’s comments that the beast suffered a seemingly mortal wound, only to come back to

⁴ ISBE, vol. 3, sv., “Nero.”

⁵ ISBE, vol. 3, sv., “Nero.” Cf. also Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 190 ff.

life again? Although the account of the succession of emperors who took Nero's place is beyond the scope of this sermon, the historical record is clear that under the rule of emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian—men who came after Nero—Rome regained the power and wealth she had before Nero brought the empire to virtual collapse. Indeed, a case can be made that when one of the beast's seven heads was slain (Nero), a series of emperors arose who saw themselves as deities and restored to Rome her imperial majesty. The fatal wound to the beast was, apparently healed. But as one writer reminds us, even though many commentators focus almost exclusively upon the details of the history of the succession of Roman emperors, this might not be as important as the big picture. "The symbolism has broader application. The revival of a powerful movement or an institution after serious trouble seems to indicate to its followers that it is invincible. The Empire seems to survive all threats, thereby showing that it was eternal and attracting more worship than ever."⁶ A counterfeit resurrection, in the sense just described, is one of the tell-tail signs that Satan is at work.

Given the reversal of Roman prestige and power, we should not be surprised when we read in verse 4, *"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?'"* Imperial Rome had come back from the brink of collapse. Her grandeur was restored. Her military was victorious once again. By worshiping the emperor and the state, men were actually worshiping the Dragon who brought up the beast from the sea. For even fallen humanity will never worship Satan directly—he is too hideous and too evil. But humanity will gladly worship the Dragon disguised as the beast. In fact, John goes on to say that this resurrected beast *"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."* Those who are not Christ's—those whose names were never written in the book of life—are at the mercy of the Dragon. And he has no mercy!

But not only was the beast given authority over the nations, he also appears to be victorious over the Saints. As John warns us in verse 7, the beast *"was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them."* As we have seen, this refers to those Christians living throughout the Roman empire, especially in cities such as Smyrna and Pergamum, where Christians had not only been prevented from buying and selling, but many had their lives taken from them because they refused to worship the beast and his image. It was widely known in John's day that countless Christians lost their lives in Rome for refusing to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ and acknowledge Caesar as Lord. But this is not a phenomena limited to ancient Rome and the first century. According to people who keep such statistics, throughout the 1990's, an average of four Christians per day were put to death because of their faith in Jesus Christ and for their refusal to deny their Lord. The continued activity of the beast throughout this present age is why John warns us now, even as he did his first century hearers, *"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."* John can say this without despair, because he knows how the story ends.

John has repeatedly told us that when the beast takes the life of one of the saints, that saint comes to life and reigns with Christ for a thousand years, taking their place in the triumphant church in heaven, that multitude so vast they cannot be counted, as they await the resurrection of their bodies. They are safe in the presence of God, and spared from the lies of the Devil. When God raises up witnesses of the law and

⁶ Poythress, [The Returning King](#), 142.

the gospel, and should the beast takes their lives, God only raises up more! Let us never forget who wins in the end. When we go to the city of Rome what do we see? The ruins of the Roman empire! When we go to Berlin, what do we see? The remains of Hitler's chancellory and the bunker where he committed suicide. We can actually buy pieces of the Berlin Wall, the very epitome of Marxist-Leninist attempts at world domination and the destruction of Christianity. Christ's kingdom always wins in the end!

But the question remains unanswered as to whether or not a final beast will arise before the judgment, a beast who will be the sum total of all the others. This is why John calls for wisdom. Recall that Jesus spoke of the course of this present age using the analogy of birth pains, indicating great travail would come immediately before the end. We have seen that both the seal and trumpet judgments intensify as the end draws near. It is certainly possible that the Roman Empire of John's day is a foreshadowing of a horrible and final beast yet to come, a global geo-political empire which will persecute the church in those days immediately before the return of Jesus Christ when Satan is released from the abyss at the end of the thousand years, and which Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 2 as a time of wide-spread apostasy, characterized by Satanic deception and appearance of the man of lawlessness, the ultimate Nero, symbolically come back to life.

But we need not fear the beast. For our victory over him is assured through the blood of Christ the Lamb. And while men worship the Dragon, and while the beast wages war on the saints, let us fight against these foes with the weapons God has given us—the law and the gospel. Instead of living in fear, let us sing the song of victory recorded in Revelation 5:12-13, *“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”* *“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”*