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Revelation #25

The “Beast” of Revelation: Who, What, Why? Revelation 13:1-10

I’m guaranteed of one thing when it comes to this sermon. Most, if not all of you, will pay very close attention. The reason is that there is hardly a more fascinating and controversial topic in eschatology than that of the Antichrist. Is the Antichrist the same as the Beast of Revelation? Is there more than one Antichrist? Is he a figure of past history or the future? Is the Antichrist a person or a power or a movement, or some combination of all? These and other questions will arise as we try to make sense of this concept.

To make sense of Revelation 13 we need to back up to the concluding verse of chapter 12. In Revelation 12:17 we find the most precise and riveting explanation for virtually everything we see in our world today: whether that be the rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism, the angry atheism that has erupted in recent years, global persecution of the Church of Jesus Christ, rampant sexual immorality, oppressive laws that seek to restrict what Christians can say and do, just to mention a few. Look again at John’s words: “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.”

We cannot afford to overlook *the crucial relationship between Revelation 12:17b and 13:1*. We read that Satan “stood on the sand of the sea” (17b). What an odd way to conclude a chapter! Odd indeed, until you realize what happens in Revelation 13:1-18. *Satan stands on the shore in order that he might beckon forth from the sea the “beast” with “ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads” (Rev. 13:1).*

Who or what is this “beast” and what relevance does it have for us today? Many mistakenly think that the “beast” is *only* the end-time Anti-Christ. He is surely that. But he is more. When you read the description of the beast in Revelation 13:2 and following you discover that John has taken the four world kingdoms described in Daniel 7 and combined them in one composite figure: the beast from the sea.

In Daniel 7 we read about four beasts who rise up out of the sea. On the significance of the “sea” as symbolic of evil, chaos, and anti-kingdom powers with whom Yahweh must contend, see Isaiah 17:12,13; 51:9-10; 27:1; 57:20; Rev. 17:8; 21:1; Jer. 46:7ff.; Job 26:7-13. We should also note that the image of an evil sea monster always symbolizes *kingdoms* that oppose and oppress God’s people (especially Egypt and Pharaoh; see especially Pss. 74:13-14; 89:10; Isa. 30:7; 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2-3; Hab. 3:8-15).

Most believe that the four earthly kingdoms symbolized by the four beasts in Daniel were four successive empires in ancient history: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. It seems quite obvious that *whereas the four beasts of Daniel 7 represent four historically successive world empires, the sea-beast of Revelation 13 is John's creative composite of them all. All the evil characteristics of those four kingdoms are now embodied in the one sea-beast who becomes Satan's principal agent in persecuting the people of God.* The point would seem to be that the "beast" of Revelation 13 is both **corporate** in nature, as well as **personal**.

That is to say, the beast is a symbol for the very real system of Satanically inspired evil, and thus opposition to the kingdom of God, that throughout history has manifested itself in a variety of forms, whether political, economic, military, social, philosophical, or religious. Anything and anyone that seeks to oppress, persecute, or destroy the Church is the beast!

What I'm saying, then, is that although the beast is very much involved in earthly events, the beast is also a trans-cultural, trans-temporal symbol for all individual and collective, Satanically-inspired, opposition to Jesus and his people. It is anything and everything (whether a principle, a person, or a power) utilized by the enemy to deceive and destroy the influence and advance of the kingdom of God.

Thus, the beast at the time when John wrote Revelation was the Roman Empire. At another time, the beast was the Arian heresy in the 4th century that denied the deity of Jesus Christ. The beast is, at one time, the emperor Decius (3rd century persecutor of the church); at another, evolutionary Darwinism. The beast is the late medieval Roman Catholic papacy, modern Protestant liberalism, Marxism, the radical feminist movement, the Pelagian heresy of the 5th century, communism, Joseph Stalin, the 17th century Enlightenment, 18th century deism, Roe v. Wade, the state persecution of Christians in China and North Korea, militant atheism in the 21st century and ISIS.

Each of these is, individually and on its own, the Beast. All of these are, collectively and in unity, the Beast. Will there also be a single **person** at the end of the age who embodies in consummate form all the characteristics of the many previous historical manifestations of the Beast? If so, should we call this person the Antichrist? Probably.

Who or What is the Beast?

A recurring theme both before and during the time of the Protestant Reformation was the identification of the Antichrist either with the Roman Catholic Church in general or the papacy in particular. Among the pre-reformers, John Wycliffe (late 14th century) believed the papacy itself, as an institution, rather than any one particular Pope, was the Antichrist. John Hus (1372-1415), the Bohemian reformer who was burned at the stake for his opposition to the RCC, embraced Wycliffe's view as well. Virtually all the Protestant Reformers, including Martin Luther and his associate Philip Melancthon, together with the English reformers and most Puritans, identified

the Antichrist with the Roman Catholic Church, or more particularly, the office of the papacy. According to John Calvin,

“Daniel [Dan 9:27] and Paul [II Thess. 2:4] foretold that Antichrist would sit in the Temple of God. With us, it is the Roman pontiff we make the leader and standard bearer of that wicked and abominable kingdom” (*Institutes*, Book IV:2:12).

Just so you know, I don't agree with those who would identify the Beast with the RCC. Most evangelicals today, especially those who embrace the futurist perspective on Revelation, refer to the Beast as the eschatological or end-time Antichrist, a literal human being who will deceive the world and persecute the church during the closing few years preceding the second advent of Jesus. Consider this statement by Dave Hunt:

“Somewhere, at this very moment, on planet Earth, the antichrist is almost certainly alive – biding his time, awaiting his cue. Banal sensationalism? Far from it! That likelihood is based upon a sober evaluation of current events in relation to Bible prophecy. Already a mature man, he is probably active in politics, perhaps even an admired world leader whose name is almost daily on everyone's lips” (Global Peace and the Rise of Antichrist, 5).

If, on the other hand, Revelation 13 and 17 are describing the oppressive reign of the “beast” and “false prophet” (whoever or whatever they may be) ***throughout the course of the inter-advent age***, these views will need to be re-examined to determine if they have biblical support.

The Sea Beast (13:1-2)

It would appear that Revelation 13:1-18 is temporally parallel with Revelation 12:6, 13-17 and explains in more detail the precise nature and extent of the Dragon's (Satan's) persecution of the people of God. In fact, ***Revelation 13 describes the earthly governmental, political, economic, as well as individual, powers of the earth through whom Satan works***. Though Satan has been defeated (12:7-12), he can still oppress the saints (12:12). And the primary way in which he exerts this nefarious influence and wages war against the seed of the woman (Rev. 12:17) is through the activities and oppression of the Beast. Here John narrates his vision of the dragon standing on the seashore, calling forth his agents through whom he will carry out his persecution of the people of God. The “war” which the dragon is said to wage with the church (Rev. 12:17) is actually undertaken by his servants as portrayed in chapter 13. Note carefully how this is stated in v. 2b –

“And to it [that is, to the beast rising out of the sea] the dragon [Satan] gave his power and his throne and great authority” (Rev. 13:2b).

In Daniel 7 the first sea-beast is like a ***lion***, the second resembled a ***bear***, and the third was like a ***leopard***. These three are all now found in the one sea-beast of Revelation 13:2 who is said to be

“like a *leopard*; its feet were like a *bear’s*, and its mouth was like a *lion’s* mouth.” Likewise, the fourth sea-beast in Daniel 7 is said to have *ten horns*, as is also the case with the sea-beast in Revelation 13. In other words, whereas the four beasts of Daniel 7 represent four historically successive world empires, the sea-beast of Revelation 13 is John’s *creative composite* of them all. All the evil characteristics of those four kingdoms are now embodied in the one sea-beast who becomes Satan’s principal agent in persecuting the people of God. The point would seem to be that the “Beast” of Revelation 13 is primarily *corporate* in nature, rather than personal.

The “dragon” (i.e., Satan) of Revelation 12:3 is said to have “seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.” Here in Revelation 13:1 the Beast who is beckoned from the sea to do the dragon’s work likewise has seven heads and ten horns, but he now has ten (rather than seven) diadems that appear on his horns (rather than on his heads). Nevertheless, it is explicitly stated that the sea-beast receives “his power and his throne and great authority” from the dragon of Revelation 12. The “crowns” or “diadems” point to the Beast’s false claim of sovereignty, royalty, and authority, in opposition to the true King, Jesus, who also wears “many diadems” (19:12,16). The “blasphemous names” on his seven heads probably represent the Beast’s arrogant claims to divinity/deity.

Because of the figurative use of numbers in Revelation, it is unlikely that “seven” and “ten” are to be identified literally and only with a specific series of rulers or kingdoms, whether in the first century or thereafter. More likely is the suggestion that both “seven” and “ten” emphasize “the completeness of oppressive power and its worldwide effect” as well as “the all-encompassing span of time during which these powers hold sway” (Beale, 684, 686).

The Johannine Epistles

Interestingly, the only place in the NT where the word “antichrist” appears is in the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, 3 John), not in Revelation. ***Nowhere in Revelation is the “beast” ever called “antichrist”.*** In his first epistle John emphatically states (1 John 2:18) that we may know this is (the) last hour because of the existence and activity of many antichrists. He says: “Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour” (2:18). Note well that the entire period between the first and second comings of Jesus = the “last days”. See Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 1 Pt. 1:20 (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11).

Later, in 1 John 2:22, he writes: “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.” The spirit of the antichrist, says John, is found in anyone who denies that Jesus is God come in the flesh (1 John 4:3). Again, in 2 John 7, he writes: “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.” Thus, for John, “antichrist” is

- Anyone “who denies that Jesus is the Christ” (1 John 2:22)

- Anyone “who denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22)
- “Every spirit that does not confess Jesus” (1 John 4:3)
- “Those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” (2 John 7)

The term “antichrist” is a combination of *anti* (against or instead of) and *christos* (Messiah, Christ). It is ambiguous whether the antichrist is merely one (or anyone) who opposes Christ as his adversary or enemy, or is also a specific person who seeks to take his place. Most have believed that antichrist is a lying pretender who portrays himself as Christ; he is a counterfeit or diabolical parody of Christ himself (see 2 Thess. 2:3-12).

Although John’s readers have been told that antichrist’s appearance is yet future, “*even now*” many antichrists have already come. Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” In 1 John 4:3 he points out that the spirit of antichrist is “*now*”, “*already*” at work in the world. Most believe that what John means in 1 John 2:18 is that the “many antichrists” (those who in the first century were denying the incarnation of Jesus) are forerunners of the one still to come. Because they proclaim the same heresies he/it will proclaim and oppose Christ now as he/it will oppose him then, they are rightly called antichrists (especially in view of their denial of Christ in 1 John 2:22-23).

The antichrists of 1 John 2:18 are the false teachers against whom the epistle is directed. In 1 John 2:19 he indicates that at one time they were “members” of the community which professed faith in Christ. They were actively involved in the ministry of the church and until the moment of separation were hardly distinguishable from the rest of the Christian society. ***The essence of antichrist, the height of heresy and the lie 'par excellence' is the denial that Jesus is the Christ*** (1 John 2:22).

Some have argued that John’s point is that there is no other “antichrist” than the “one” even then operative in his day or the “one” who takes up and perpetuates this heresy in subsequent history. In other words, *anyone in general* can be “antichrist”, if he or she espouses this heresy, but *no one in particular*, whether in the first or the twenty-first centuries, is *the* antichrist as if there were only one to whom the others look forward. In other words, the “antichrist” who his readers were told was yet to come is “now” with them in the form of *anyone* who espouses the heretical denial of the incarnation of the Son of God.

But I’m not persuaded by this. I believe that the “spirit” of the future Antichrist was already present in the first century among those who denied that Jesus was God come in the flesh. That same “spirit” of Antichrist exists today, but that does not mean there won’t be a final, personal embodiment in one particular individual. The question still remains: Is the *Beast* of Revelation the same as the *Antichrist* of 1 and 2 John?

The 42 Months of the Beast’s Authority (13:5)

The identity of the Beast in Revelation 13 is revealed to some degree by the reference to the *duration* of its (his?) reign. According to 13:5-8, the Beast makes war with the saints for a period of **42 months**, the same length of time, according to Revelation 11:2, that the “holy city” [i.e., the people of God] is trampled upon.

Therefore, if the period 3½ years = 42 months = 1260 days = time, times, half a time, all refer to the entirety of the present inter-advent age, the Beast cannot be merely an individual living at the end of human history. Rather, the Beast would be a symbol for the system of Satanically inspired evil, and thus opposition to the kingdom of God, that throughout history has manifested itself in a variety of forms, whether political, economic, military, social, philosophical, or religious. Alan Johnson provides this excellent explanation. The Beast, notes Alan Johnson,

“is not to be identified in its description with any one historical form of its expression or with any one institutional aspect of its manifestation. In other words, the beast may appear now as Sodom, Egypt, Rome, or even Jerusalem and may manifest itself as a political power, an economic power, a religious power, or a heresy (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3) This interpretation does not exclude the possibility that there will be a final climactic appearance of the beast in history in a person; in a political, religious, or economic system; or in a final totalitarian culture combining all these. The point is that the beast cannot be limited to either the past or the future” (129).

The “blasphemous names” on the Beast’s heads (Rev. 13:1) indicate that he/it challenges the supremacy and majesty of God by denying and defying the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Therefore, says Johnson,

“whatever person or system – whether political, social, economic, or religious – cooperates with Satan by exalting itself against God’s sovereignty and by setting itself up to destroy the followers of Jesus, or entices them to become followers of Satan through deception, idolatry, blasphemy, and spiritual adultery, embodies the beast of Revelation 13. The description John gives of the beast from the sea does not describe a mere human political entity such as Rome. Rather, it describes in archetypal language the hideous, Satan-backed system of deception and idolatry that may at any time express itself in human systems of various kinds, such as Rome. Yet at the same time John also seems to be saying that this blasphemous, blaspheming, and blasphemy-producing reality will have a final, intense, and, for the saints, utterly devastating manifestation” (129).

The Beast, then, is a trans-cultural, trans-temporal symbol for all individual and collective, Satanically-inspired, opposition to Jesus and his people. It is anything and everything (whether a principle, a person, or a power) utilized by the enemy to deceive and destroy the influence and advance of the kingdom of God.

The Beast’s “mortal wound” (13:3)

John sees the Beast with a wound on one of his heads. The word translated “wound” (*plege*) is used throughout Revelation (11x) for the “plagues” that God inflicts on an unbelieving world. In other words, the likelihood is that God is the one who strikes this blow in judgment against the Beast.

Although we must not seek to identify or reduce the Beast to any one historical event, institution, or person, John does appear to use the historical career of the Roman emperor *Nero* as a way to illustrate in graphic terms the character and agenda of this archenemy of the kingdom. Nero horribly persecuted the early church and most believe he was responsible for the martyrdom of both Peter and Paul. Nero committed suicide in 68 a.d., although some thought he never died and would soon return to take up once again his rule over Rome. Others believed he died but was raised from the dead.

Although Nero is nowhere explicitly mentioned in Revelation, many believe that John makes use of him and his story to craft his image of what the Beast is like. That is to say, John uses Nero because he was the first and most obvious and hideous example of the antichristian imperial power that threatened the people of God. The legend of Nero’s return thus proved helpful to John because he could adapt it to serve his own portrayal of the conflict between the Beast and the church. Nero’s own “death,” “resurrection,” and “return” provided a perfect canvas on which John could paint both the character and course of the Beast’s attempt to rival God. In John’s day that Beast was Rome. In subsequent centuries it is any and all individual and collective attempts to oppose the kingdom of God and his purposes in Christ.

Those who find in Revelation 13 the legend of Nero’s return point to v. 3 as one particular historical manifestation of this death-wound / healing scenario. As I said, whereas Nero committed suicide in 68 a.d., some thought he never died while others believed he died but was raised from the dead. It may have appeared that the Beast (i.e., Rome) was slain with Nero’s death, since it brought a dramatic decrease in the persecution of Christians.

However, the Emperor Vespasian soon solidified the empire once again, so that the Roman Beast appeared to have fully recovered. Thus, whereas we read in 13:3 that only one of the Beast’s heads was wounded, we read in 13:12, 14 that it is the Beast itself that recovers from the wound.

Of great importance is the way John describes the Beast in terms that echo the person and work of Christ. In other words, for John *the Beast is an imitation or satanic parody of Jesus Christ*. For example, in Revelation 13:3 the phrase “seemed to have a mortal wound” should probably be translated “as though slain unto death.” This is almost the precise language used in Revelation 5:6 to describe Jesus, the Lamb of God. “It is clearly intended to create a parallel between Christ’s death and resurrection, on the one hand, and the beast’s mortal wound and its healing, on the other” (Bauckham, 432).

This also may suggest that the “wound” or “plague” suffered by the Beast was inflicted by Jesus through the latter’s death and resurrection. It appeared as though the wound was a fatal one. In

one sense, it really was. The devil suffered a spiritually fatal blow at Calvary. Despite defeat, however, the devil and his forces, as manifest in and through the “Beast”, continue to exist. The imagery of a “fatal” blow followed by continued life (“its mortal wound was healed”) may well point to what we see in Revelation 12:7-12. There Satan is defeated. He loses his legal grounds for accusing the saints. His moral authority over them is gone. Yet he continues to thrive on earth and to persecute, and often times kill, the people of God. It is this continuing presence of Satan, in and through the Beast, in spite of his apparent defeat at Calvary, that amazes the unbelieving world and wins their allegiance and worship.

There is yet another parallel between the Beast and the Lamb in Revelation 13:14. There John says the Beast “yet lived” and uses a verb (*ezenen*) that is found in Revelation 2:8 with reference to the resurrection of Jesus (cf. 1:18). Note also that the universal worship of the Beast (13:4, 8) following its “death and resurrection”, parallels the universal worship of the Lamb (5:8-14) following his death and resurrection! In 13:2 we read that the dragon (Satan) gives the Beast his power, throne and authority. This parallels the Father’s gift to the Lamb of authority and a place on his throne (2:28; 3:21). We should also note that both Jesus and the beast have swords (13:19; 20:4), both have followers who have their names written on their foreheads (see 13:16-14:1), and both have horns (5:6; 13:1, 11).

It would seem, then, that the Beast is primarily Satan himself “as he repeatedly works through his chosen agents throughout history [Nero certainly being one]. Therefore, whenever any major opponent of God reaches his demise, it appears as if the beast has been defeated, yet he will arise again in some other form, until the end of history. Such revivals make it appear as if Christ’s defeat of the devil was not very decisive. But such revivals are under the ultimate hand of God, who ‘gives authority’” (Beale, 691).

Worship of the Beast (13:4)

This passage refers to the devotion of the unbelieving world to anything and anyone other than Jesus. The power and influence of the Beast, in whatever form it manifests itself, is grounds for their declaration concerning what they perceive to be the Beast’s incomparable authority: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” Indeed, this is the precise terminology found throughout the OT that is applied to YHWH (see Exod. 8:10; 15:11; Deut. 3:24; Isa. 40:18,25; 44:7; 46:5; Pss. 35:10; 71:19; 86:8; 89:8; 113:5; Micah 7:18).

The Beast’s Persecution of the People of God (13:5-10)

These verses simply portray yet again what we see throughout Revelation: the Beast’s (Satan’s) blasphemy of God and persecution of his people throughout the present Church age. The statement “to make war” (v. 7) doesn’t necessarily mean that the Beast organizes literal armed conflict with the church but rather has in view the Beast’s hatred of the Church and his/its efforts to undermine everything the Church does and believes. Thus when John says the Beast will

“conquer” the saints he doesn’t mean the people of God lose their faith in Christ but that many of them suffer martyrdom at the hands of the Beast and his cohorts.

The mistake of dispensational interpreters of Revelation is to project these events into a future “tribulation” period unrelated to the situation, circumstances, and practical needs of all those believers resident in the late first century in the seven churches of Asia Minor. Whatever Revelation 13:1-10 means, it applies to the people of John’s day to whom the book was written. Confirmation of this is found in v. 9, where we find the familiar exhortation, “If anyone has an ear, let him hear.” The only other place this exhortation appears is at the conclusion of each of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3. Thus, vv. 9-10 describe the appropriate response of Christians to the deception and persecution portrayed in vv. 1-8.

Revelation 13:10 is a paraphrase that combines Jeremiah 15:2 and 43:11. John’s point is that believers are not to offer physical or violent resistance to their persecutors but are to faithfully submit to whatever destiny awaits them as they persevere in their trust in Jesus.

The People of God and the Lamb’s Book of Life (13:8)

There are two ways of translating v. 8, both of which are grammatically possible: (1) “whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (ESV); or, (2) “whose name has not been written in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain from the foundation of the world.”

The almost parallel statement in 17:8 would indicate that (1) is correct. Also, whereas it can certainly be said that the Lamb of God was “foreknown before the foundation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20) and that he was “delivered up [to die] by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23), what can it possibly mean theologically to say that the Lamb of God was “slain from the foundation of the world”? The point of the text is that the people who worship the beast do so because their names have *not* been written in the book of life.’ That is why they are deceived by the Beast.

In sum, what we see here in v. 8 is the declaration that whoever does not worship Jesus Christ as God is guilty of idolatry. Anytime anyone worships or gives their life, energy, and devotion to themselves or to money or to political power or to military strength or to educational achievements or to any philosophy or religion or to any individual leader anywhere in the world that does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is guilty of worshiping the Beast.