

Revelation 13:1-14:5

I. Symbolism of the first beast

- “I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another... This is what he said: “As for the fourth beast there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth that shall be different from all the other kingdoms; it shall devour the whole earth and trample it down and break it to pieces. As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them.” From Daniel 7
- The first beast of Rev 13 combines elements of all four beasts in Daniel – who represent four world empires – as a way to signify that the power of the Roman Empire is more beastly than the four beasts combined.
- Traditional interpretations of Daniel 7 when Rev was written identified the four beasts of Daniel with four empires: Babylon, the Medo-Persians, Greece under Alexander the Great, and Rome (the beast with ten horns is Rome).
- We are later told that the number 7 symbolizes the seven hills of Rome, and the seven kings of Rome. Those Kings differ depending on whether one starts counting with Julius Caesar or Augustus Caesar, but the list ends with Domitian in one way or another.
- The head who received a mortal wound and lived again is likely a reference to the myth of Nero redivivus (Nero come back to life). The Roman writers Juvenal and Pliny the Younger call Domitian a second Nero.
- The Roman beast wages war against the holy ones, promotes devil worship, and excludes followers of Jesus from the book of life.

II. Symbolism of the second beast

- The beast who comes from the earth is a parody of Jesus and Elijah
- It resembles a lamb with its two horns, but speaks like a dragon, and is connected to false prophecy elsewhere in Rev
- It works signs and wonders that resembles Elijah’s
- It marks people on their hands and heads with a seal, just as the servants of God are sealed
- Again, the beast symbolizes Roman power, with a particular emphasis on the cult of the Empire, as signs and wonders that bear an uncanny resemblance to biblical miracles were an aspect of the myth of the Imperial cult.
- Again, the reference to surviving a wound is probably a reference to Nero (who committed suicide with a sword) and Domitian, the second Nero.
- This leads to what is likely the most famous symbol of the beast in Revelation: 666. According to Hebrew Gematria (where letters also serve as numbers) 666 is the numerical value of the title “Nero Caesar.” Variants of this passage use the number 616, as this would be the numerical value of the same title in Latin.

III. The “Satanic Trinity”

- Thus far in Rev, we have been introduced to three forms of beasts, that are sometimes referred to as the “Satanic Trinity.”
- The dragon represents “primeval, supernatural opposition to God,” the first beast (from the sea) represents the “imperial power of Rome,” and the second beast (from the earth) represents the “propaganda machine of the imperial cult.” See Richard Bauckham
- “The powerful mythic resonances of the images of chapter 12-13 place the coming confrontation between Christians and the power of Rome in the perspective of the cosmic war of evil against God and his people.” Bauckham
- In other words, John sees Rome’s arrogant military power combined with its nationalistic worship as incarnations of the forces of evil that are at war with God.
- It is worth acknowledging that while many Christians have identified different individuals and entities with the beast (the Pope, Martin Luther, other Empires, etc.) the beasts are symbols of patterns of history.

IV. The Lamb’s “Army”

- The beginning of Rev 14 is an image of consolation, and an encouragement that the Church will endure the beasts.
- Recalling earlier passages in Rev where the 144,000 are revealed to be the white-robed army of martyrs, we see the means to victory: martyrdom.
- The Lamb’s Army is a tool of anti-propaganda: “The political and military might of the beast...here seems triumphant even over the witnesses of Jesus. That it can put Christian martyrs to death apparently with impunity seems the final proof of the invincible, godlike might of the beast. Even Christians must have been tempted to see it that way...What was the point of resisting the beast when he was proving irresistible? John’s message is that from the heavenly perspective things look quite different. The martyrs are the real victors. To be faithful in witness to the true God even to the point of death is not to become a victim of the beast, but to take the first against him and win.” Bauckham