



Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture

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Revelation

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to the seven churches: **Whoever has ears ought to hear.** “Pay careful attention!” John prophesies that **anyone destined for captivity or to be slain by the sword** will not be able to escape his or her fate. Although John echoes phrases from Jer 15:2 and 43:11, the context is quite different. In Jeremiah the prophet speaks of judgment on Judah and Egypt at the hands of Babylon because of their sins; here the prophet speaks of captivity and martyrdom for **the holy ones**, God’s people, because of the temporary triumph of evil. The common element is the inevitability of the suffering. How must Christians respond to persecution by the seemingly all-powerful beast? The answer is by **faithful endurance** or “endurance and faith” (NRSV, RSV). These closely related virtues are the ones most frequently named in the book of Revelation.

Neither here nor anywhere else does Revelation summon Christians to resist their enemies by actual physical fighting.

Reflection and Application (13:5–10)

Why does God allow the beast to wage war against the holy ones and to conquer them? Revelation does not directly answer this question. Neither do other New Testament texts that predict the increase of evil and hardship for God’s people when history nears its climax.¹¹ Ultimately, Christians are called to trust in God’s goodness as amply demonstrated through the gift of his Son. The best guide to God’s attitude toward us through times of affliction remains St. Paul’s words in Rom 8:28–39.

If we wish to reflect on God’s purposes, it is important to remember the difference between his permissive and his deliberate will: God allows evil to flourish; he does not desire it. God’s desire is for a world absolutely free of evil, namely, the new heavens and new earth that Revelation reveals he is about to establish (21:4, 27; 2 Pet 3:13).

Nevertheless, God knows how to make use of evil choices by humans and supernatural beings to advance his plan (Gen 50:20; Luke 22:3). When God allows evil to run its course and manifest its true nature, the difference between good and evil, between worshiping God and worshiping anything else, becomes clear (Rom 1:18–32). This will help some people to make better choices and find salvation. This manifestation of evil also makes the justice of God’s judgment more obvious when he condemns those who choose the worship of idols and the evil doing that accompanies it (Rev 9:20–21; 11:18; 16:5–6).

11. See Matt 24:9–14; 2 Thess 2:3–12; 2 Tim 3:1–5; 4:1–8; 2 Pet 2:2–4.

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Regarding Christians, the consistent teaching of Scripture is that trials, although temporarily painful, make us better if we endure them with faith and hope (13:10; 14:12; Sir 2; Heb 12:1–13). Revelation makes clear that God delights in the virtue of his people who have been faithful through trial (7:13–17; 12:11–12), that he honors those who share in Christ’s ministry of testifying to the truth and who suffer for it (6:9–11; 11:3–12), and that righteous deeds like these are “a bright, clean linen garment” that will adorn the Bride of the Lamb (19:7–8). Finally, as noticed earlier, suffering in this world is strictly time-limited: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain” (21:4).

The Second Beast and Its Relationship to the First Beast (13:11–18)

¹¹Then I saw another beast come up out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb’s but spoke like a dragon. ¹²It wielded all the authority of the first beast in its sight and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. ¹³It performed great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of everyone. ¹⁴It deceived the inhabitants of the earth with the signs it was allowed to perform in the sight of the first beast, telling them to make an image for the beast who had been wounded by the sword and revived. ¹⁵It was then permitted to breathe life into the beast’s image, so that the beast’s image could speak and [could] have anyone who did not worship it put to death. ¹⁶It forced all the people, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to be given a stamped image on their right hands or their foreheads, ¹⁷so that no one could buy or sell except one who had the stamped image of the beast’s name or the number that stood for its name.

¹⁸Wisdom is needed here; one who understands can calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number that stands for a person. His number is six hundred and sixty-six.

OT: Exod 7:11; 13:9; Deut 6:8; 2 Kings 1:10–14; Dan 3

NT: Matt 7:15; 24:24; 2 Thess 2:10–12; Rev 7:2–3; 16:13–14

While the beast from the sea is associated with political power, the second beast that comes up **out of the earth** is associated with religious deception and later is referred to simply as “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). Like the first beast, it is demonic in nature although it operates in human history

through human institutions and individuals. Also like the first beast, it is depicted as having a faux resemblance to Jesus, with **two horns like a lamb's**, but it has a voice and message that betray its true character and allegiance: it **spoke like a dragon**. Its deceptive appearance recalls Jesus' warning, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves" (Matt 7:15).

13:12

The second beast functions in close relationship with the first beast: It **wielded all the authority of the first beast in its sight**, or "in his presence" (RSV), or best, "on its behalf" (NIV, NJB, NRSV). Its essential work is summed up in a phrase: it **made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed**. Readers of John's Gospel will recognize a perverted analogy to the work of the Spirit, to the Church's witness to Christ's resurrection, and to the Spirit's role in Christian worship (John 4:23–24; 14:16, 26; 16:14–15). Combining these parallels with how the beast parallels the dragon (12:3; 13:1), a kind of anti-Trinity—a diabolical counterfeit of the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit—comes into view. R. H. Mounce sums up the likeness: "As Christ received authority from the Father (Matt 11:27), so Antichrist receives authority from the dragon (Rev 13:4), and as the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), so the false prophet glorifies the Antichrist (Rev 13:12)."¹²

The second beast is a propagandist for the first. In its first-century setting, there is no individual whose conduct is an obvious match to that of the second beast. Consequently, it probably referred corporately to the priesthood of the imperial cult, consisting of local officials who promoted and enforced worship of the emperor or of the goddess Roma as a way of expressing and deepening loyalty to the empire.

3:13–15

The false prophet deceives **the inhabitants of the earth**, those who are not God's people (13:8), and leads them to worship the beast by way of **great signs** it performs publicly on behalf of the beast (see 13:12). These imitate the signs and wonders that the two witnesses perform (11:3–5), even **making fire come down from heaven** like Elijah of old (2 Kings 1:10–12). This accords with Jesus' prediction in his Olivet discourse: "False messiahs and false prophets will arise, and they will perform signs and wonders so great as to deceive, if that were possible, even the elect" (Matt 24:24). St. Paul predicts deceptive miracles on the part of "the one whose coming springs from the power of Satan in every mighty deed and in signs and wonders that lie" (2 Thess 2:9). What distinguishes John's prophecy in Revelation from Paul's in 2 Thessalonians is

that John describes two end-time adversaries through whom Satan works, while Paul mentions only one.

To promote worship of the first beast, the second beast directs the people to make **an image** in its honor and breathes **life into the beast's image** so that it can **speak**. At the end of the first century there was a tremendous proliferation of temples and images for the imperial cult, especially in Asia Minor, including all seven of the cities to which Revelation is addressed. At Ephesus was a temple to the emperor Domitian, featuring a colossal statue over twenty-two feet high. The idea of making an image speak was well known in the ancient world. After an idol was made, it was customary to "animate" it by means of a magical ritual to cause the god to inhabit it and to "speak" through casting lots to obtain answers to questions, through prophetic oracles by a priest, or through a ventriloquist's trick.

The additional consequence—to **have anyone who did not worship it put to death**—recalls the archetypal biblical example of government-imposed idolatry, the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar that the three young men were commanded to worship on pain of death (Dan 3). Revelation 13:3, 12, and 14 emphasize the seeming "resurrection" of the first beast by mentioning its recovery from a **mortal wound**. Verse 14 adds the detail that the wound came **by the sword**, perhaps alluding to Nero's death by a self-inflicted sword wound (see comments on vv. 3, 18).

The second beast introduces some kind of sign that distinguishes those who worship and accept the patronage of the beast from those who do not. It requires **all the people** to receive a **stamped image** of the beast's name or number **on their right hands or their foreheads**. This "mark" (NIV)¹³ of the beast mimics the "seal of the living God" (7:2–4) and the names of God and the Lamb written on the foreheads of the one hundred and forty-four thousand (14:1) and of the redeemed (22:4). The stamped image, like the seal, denotes allegiance and ownership. Livestock, slaves, and soldiers in the first century often bore a tattoo or brand indicating to whom they belonged or under whose patronage and protection they lived. The stamped image bears **the beast's name or the number that stood for its name**. The false prophet makes this mark a condition of participation in the economic life of society; only those having it can **buy or sell**. In other words, the second beast subjects Christians who refuse the mark of the beast to economic discrimination.

13:16–17

We do not have direct evidence of economic restrictions on Christians in the first century, although it is possible that this took place locally in one or more

12. R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 255.

13. Greek *charagma*. The NABRE offers the most literal translation ("to be branded," NJB; "to be marked," RSV; Vulgate, *habere caracter*).

Attributes of the Second Beast, the False Prophet

BIBLICAL
BACKGROUND

Here is a summary of the attributes and activity of the second beast, the false prophet. As with the rest of Revelation, readers should be alert to figurative fulfillments.

- Like the first beast, it is a superhuman entity that advances Satan's goals in human history.
- It gives the appearance of being good, even Christlike, yet its message is from the devil (13:11).
- It collaborates closely with the first beast, which wields political power, exercising a delegated authority and promoting idolatrous submission to it (13:12).
- It deceives people to worship the first beast by performing seemingly miraculous signs and by setting up an image of the first beast that can speak (13:13–15).
- It also compels worship of the beast by putting to death those who refuse to worship and by excluding from economic life all who do not express allegiance to the beast by accepting its "stamped image" (13:16–17).
- It propagandizes, performing signs through its agents, to persuade "the kings of the whole world" to battle against God and his people (16:13–16).

of the seven cities where the churches were located. For instance, it is likely that the requirement of participation in pagan rites excluded Christians from guilds, which were an important part of economic life in Pergamum and Thyatira.

13:18

With the statement that **the number of the beast is six hundred and sixty-six** we have arrived at the verse in Revelation that has probably aroused more speculation than any other. To avoid being led astray, the first words of the verse are important: **Wisdom is needed here**. A clue is offered regarding the identity of the beast-antichrist, but understanding must be brought to bear. That discernment should take into account the other attributes of the beast-antichrist and the characteristics of its work as described in Revelation and elsewhere in the New Testament (see comments on 13:1–10 and sidebar, "The Antichrist in the New Testament," pp. 226–27). Among its traits, the *number* of the beast is probably the least important and may pertain primarily to its manifestation in the first century. What should be sought in discerning the presence of the beast at any time in Christian history is a "family resemblance" between its biblical portrait and a contemporary reality.

What does the number signify? At the most basic level of biblical symbolism, if seven represents perfection, six signifies imperfection. When there are three sixes, we have the superlative form of imperfection. However, it is likely that John has in mind a more precise meaning since he says that it is possible to **calculate** (literally, "count") the number of the beast and that it **stands for a person** (literally, "is the number of a man"). This suggests the ancient practice of *†*gematria (guh-MAY-tree-uh). Both in Hebrew and in Greek the letters of the alphabet were also used as numbers (in Hebrew, the first nine letters signify one to nine; the next nine letters signify ten to ninety, and so on). It is therefore possible to add up the numerical value of the letters and to ascertain a number for a word or phrase. According to gematria, if the numerical value of two words or phrases is the same, there is a relationship between them. When the Greek word for "beast," *thērion*, is transliterated into Hebrew (i.e., written with Hebrew letters), the numerical value of the letters is 666. When the Greek version of Nero's name, Caesar Neron, is transliterated into Hebrew, it also totals 666.¹⁴ Many scholars believe that John identifies Nero with the number of the beast.

This interpretation gains support from the fact that some ancient manuscripts give the number of the beast as six hundred and sixteen, which is the sum of the letters in Nero's name if it is transliterated from *Latin* into Hebrew.¹⁵ Given the highly symbolic nature of Revelation, if John understood the number to represent Nero's name, it does not mean that he literally identified Nero with the beast, but it might mean that he understood the beast to be a Nero-like figure and Nero to have been a historical embodiment of the beast.

14. The English letters for the Hebrew are QSR NRW. Here are the numeric values of the Hebrew letters: Q = 100 + S = 60 + R = 200 + N = 50 + R = 200 + W = 6 + N = 50, totaling 666.

15. Gematria can yield a wide variety of results depending on which name, spelling, and language is used. The emperors Caligula and Domitian can also total 666 (when the abbreviation of the latter's titles printed on coins and inscriptions is used). Modern applications of gematria to 666 have identified Adolf Hitler, Henry Kissinger, Ronald Wilson Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama (Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness; Following the Lamb into the New Creation* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011], 126–28).

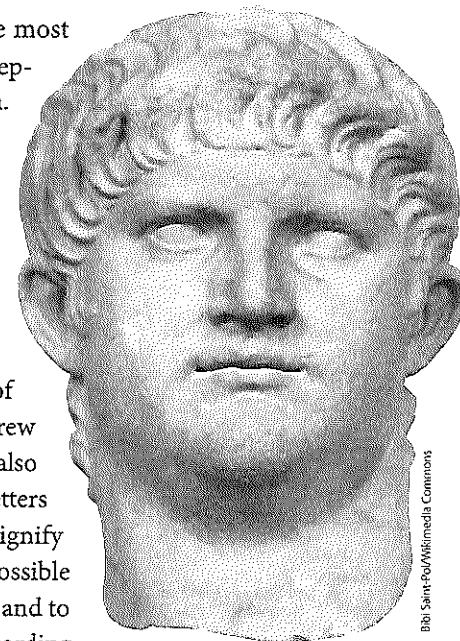


Fig. 12. The bust of the emperor Nero (AD 54–68), the first to aggressively persecute the Church. The letters of his name, Neron Caesar, add up to 666 (see 13:18).

Bar Saint-Pol/Wikimedia Commons

What is the meaning today of John's vision of the two beasts, long after the death of Nero and the end of the Roman Empire? [†]Preterist interpreters say that the primary meaning of Revelation lies in the past, in first-century events. [†]Futurists answer that because Rev 16–19 depicts the activity of the beast immediately before the return of Christ, these visions refer to a period of trial at the end of history. However, a strict futurist interpretation fails to do justice to the book's clear references to Rome and circumstances of the first century. The interpretation that seems most consistent with the pattern of biblical prophecy is that Revelation speaks about history's end while directly addressing challenges its original readers faced in the first century, and at the same time speaks to God's people about analogous challenges that arise throughout the course of history.

By associating first-century adversaries of God's people (Rome, the emperor, and the enforcers of the imperial cult) with ancient adversaries (e.g., Egypt, Babylon, Antiochus Epiphanes), Revelation itself points toward a [†]typological mode of interpreting Scripture and history. History repeats itself: enemies arise, and in a similar manner God intervenes to save his people again and again. The end of history will be marked by a climactic struggle and salvation resembling struggles and salvation that have taken place earlier.

Reflection and Application (13:1–18)

Discerning the beast. It is incumbent upon Christians to discern the spiritual dynamics of the times in which they live. Already in the first century, church leaders discerned that “the spirit of the antichrist . . . is already in the world” (1 John 4:3) and that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2 Thess 2:7). In a similar way it is sometimes possible to discern the spirit of the first or second beast in historical movements that manifest a family resemblance to the antichrist or the false prophet. For instance, at the end of the eighteenth century, the French Revolution tried to destroy the Church in France. Its leaders seized the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, set up an image of the goddess Reason, and established worship of it. In the twentieth century, National Socialism in Germany rejected Christianity, proclaimed the Führer and the Nazi party as the nation's hope, and persecuted Christians who rejected Nazi ideology, while killing millions of Jews and Christians and starting a world war. Communist regimes of the twentieth century taught atheism, held up the party and some of its leaders as saviors, persecuted

religion, and pressured clergy and lay leaders to make the Church a tool of the government.¹⁶

History provides analogies to the second beast's economic discrimination against those who do not bear the stamped image of the beast. People who attended church or had their children baptized in the Soviet Union often lost their jobs or saw their children denied a university education. Similar persecution has been carried out in Muslim states where, in addition to violent persecution, social, legal, and economic restrictions, and the *jizya* (a tax on non-Muslims), have tempted Christians to renounce their faith in exchange for greater opportunity in society (Mark 8:36).

Although in Revelation the second beast, the false prophet, wields political power to persecute Christians, its primary tool is deception. Revelation unmasks the deceptive ideology of the Roman Empire, which appeared noble and beneficial in some respects, but was in fact idolatrous, violent, immoral, and greedy (see chap. 18), a tool of Satan. Similar deception exists in more recent ideologies. Both socialism and capitalism have led to grave evils when practiced without due regard to fundamental moral principles. The gay rights movement claims to promote justice, freedom, and love yet rejects God's teaching about love, sex, and marriage that is inscribed in our nature and explicitly taught in Scripture. In addition, the movement often persecutes those who refuse to bow to its ideology. False ideologies undergird other evil practices. Abortion is defended on the basis of freedom of choice, privacy, the welfare of women, and quality of life. Pornography is defended in the name of freedom and art, while euthanasia is presented as kindness to the sick and elderly, and so on.

What would you do? Although some Christians face severe persecution at the time of this writing, many do not. However, as St. Paul learned, circumstances can change rapidly. After many positive experiences with Roman officials (see, e.g., Acts 18:14–16; 19:35–40), Paul wrote, “Rulers are not a cause of fear to good conduct, but to evil,” and referred to civil authorities as “ministers of God” for justice (Rom 13:3, 6). However, only ten years later the emperor Nero beheaded Paul for his Christian faith. The possibility of abrupt social change and persecution is always present, and Jesus prepared his disciples for this eventuality (Matt 10:16–39; John 15:18–19).

So, what would you do if the government of your country placed economic burdens on Christians who do not subscribe to the prevailing ideology? What if the government would deny your children a university education if you would

16. See A. H. and A. K., “State Policy toward the Church in Czechoslovakia,” January 4, 1964, <http://www.osaarchivum.org/greenfield/repository/osa:af03df66-f66e-4ddf-b12a-c0ec67c77ed4>.

not subscribe to its policies about religion, politics, or sexual morality? What if the mass media, the system of public education, and the society around you were pressuring you and your children to accept beliefs and behaviors that contradict the teaching of Scripture and the Church? What if the government succeeded in dividing the Church and some priests and bishops were encouraging Catholics to accept what is contrary to the teaching of Christ and the Church?

Even if you are clear about how to respond, what about your family members or fellow parishioners? It is essential to effectively evangelize, catechize, and lead the next generation of Christians to be faithful witnesses, to form Catholics who are able to meet the test. Cultural Catholicism, even weekly participation in Sunday Mass, is not enough. Temptations assault Christians today through the mass media in ways John's readers never experienced. Satan is still at work through his agents to conform believers not only to the surrounding society and its worldview but to what it worships (its ultimate values), its moral standards, and ultimately its fate.

Mark of the beast. Some Christians have speculated that the beast's exclusion of Christ's faithful from commerce for not accepting "the stamped image of the beast's name or the number that stood for its name" could be implemented literally by means of a surgically implanted electronic chip that identifies a person and his or her financial information in a cashless economy. While such a scenario is possible, the "stamped image" or mark of the beast need not be physical. After all, the seal of the living God and the names of God and the Lamb (7:2–3; 14:1) that mark the faithful are spiritual rather than physical. Whatever one thinks of the use of "implanted" electronic means of managing financial transactions, the fundamental problem with the mark of the beast is a spiritual compromise with evil. To focus on a literal physical mark could lead Christians to fail to notice and refuse marks of collaboration with the beast that come in subtler forms.

The Lamb's Companions, the Eternal Gospel, and the Harvest of the Earth

Revelation 14:1–20

After John's visions of the dragon, the beast, and the second beast, his readers are ready for a consoling message that will sustain their hope. The visions of this chapter do precisely that by revealing the intimate relationship with Christ available to God's people now, by indicating that God is now calling the whole world to repentance, and by giving a glimpse of the final destiny of the just and the wicked that lies just over the horizon.

Revelation's structure is characterized by scenes of fear and danger alternating with scenes showing God's salvation and joy. At the same time this alternation likewise reveals the structure of reality. In the present age, evil forces are still at large; nevertheless, the Lamb's power is greater and his people are united to him and under his protection. Final victory and salvation are assured and can even be experienced now in the midst of trials.

The Lamb and His Companions (14:1–5)

¹Then I looked and there was the Lamb standing on Mount [†]Zion, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of rushing water or a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. ³They were singing [what seemed to be] a new hymn before the throne, before the four living