

Visions of Evil in the Book of Revelation

1. Introduction

The author of Revelation offers several visions to demonstrate how the heavenly world perceives the Roman empire: "Revelation portrays the Roman Empire as a system of violent oppression, founded on conquest, maintained by violence and oppression" (R. Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 35). In addition to the image of the harlot to represent the city of Rome (Rev. 17-18), the author develops the image of a sea-monster or beast from the sea who represents the political power of the Roman emperors. The harlot rides upon the beast (17:3) for the city of Rome depends upon the might of her emperors' conquests for her power.

2. The Beast from the Sea (Revelation 13)

The vision of the beast arising from the sea has been influenced by traditions in Daniel 7:2-8 about the four beasts (like a lion, bear and leopard), and another beast who has ten horns (7:7). Compare the image of Leviathan, the seven-headed serpent (Isa. 27:1), who also rises from the sea. The beast in Revelation thus represents the incarnation of the power of evil, whose authority is derived from the dragon, i.e. Satan (13:2).

The beast (= Roman power) has seven heads to represent seven emperors. One 'head' (king) has a mortal wound that is healed (13:3). Who is this king/emperor?

3. The Nero Legend

Nero was a murderous tyrant who even killed his own mother. He was also responsible for a mass persecution of the Christians in 64 CE (he killed both Peter and Paul).

But he was highly regarded in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire (particularly Parthia). He committed suicide in 68 CE (Suetonius, *Nero* 49), although rumours soon grew that he had not died but had fled to Parthia. Tacitus thus writes: 'The reports with regard to his death had been varied, and therefore many people imagined and believed that he was still alive' (*Histories* 2:8).

In the Book of Revelation this legend seems to take the form that Nero did not

flee to the East but had in fact died and would come alive again and return to Rome. This would explain the reference in 13:3-4 to the mortal wound that is healed. Note especially the reference to the fact that the beast 'was wounded by a sword' (13:14), which is a possible allusion to Nero's own death.

4. The Blasphemies of the Beast

Nero/the beast is portrayed as the Antichrist, a figure who was traditionally associated with making claims to be God. See Rev. 13:1, 5 where the beast blasphemes: it gives itself divine names and 'is given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words' (v. 5). This must refer to the numerous titles that the Roman emperors applied to themselves (e.g., god, saviour, lord), titles that Christians associated with God and Christ alone. Nero himself claimed to be a divine being (he demanded to be worshipped as Mithras and wore a radiate crown).

Several of the beast's subjects respond positively to his divine claims (13:3-4), and the second beast from the land (see also 16:13; 19:20) promotes the 'imperial cult' by setting up the image of the beast and promoting its worship in Asia Minor.

5. The Number of the Beast

Can any further evidence be adduced to demonstrate that the beast is identified with Nero?

Note the reference to 'the number of the beast' in 13:17, which is said to be a human number and amounts to 666 (v. 18). The most appropriate way of explaining this number is by means of the Hebrew practice known as *gematria* (i.e., attributing a numerical value to each letter, but only to the consonants). It is therefore indicative that the title 'Nerôn Caisar' ('the emperor Nero') adds up to 666 (note that 'ô' represents a consonant in Hebrew):

Nerôn Caisar: n = 50; r = 200; ô = 6; n = 50; and q = 100; s = 60; r = 200 = 666.

Note also the Greek word for 'beast' (*thêrion*); in Hebrew transliteration this word also amounts to 666:

th = 400; r = 200; i = 10; o = 6; n = 50 = 666.

6. The Seven Kings (Revelation 17)

Another beast appears in chapter 17 who is to be identified with the beast of chapter 13.

Both possess seven heads and ten horns, the two carry blasphemous names, and, in both cases, one of the heads is to be identified with the beast itself. The beast and its seven heads become interchangeable (the empire's authority personified in its emperor).

17:9-11 reads: 'And they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain a little while. And the beast which was and is not, he himself is also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction'. Can these seven kings be identified? If one begins with Augustus, this makes Nero the fifth; 'the one who is' refers to Galba, and the seventh is Otho. The eighth beast is one of the seven, and could therefore signify the return of Nero. Nero is the beast 'who was, is not and will be'.

This also explains the reference in 17:16 to the beast destroying the harlot. Why would the emperor seek to destroy Rome? This becomes understandable in the light of the Nero legend that he would return from the East to seek vengeance on the city that rejected him.

7. The Beast as a Parody of Christ

The presentation of the beast has deliberately been patterned on the presentation of Christ.

These parallels indicate the establishment of a parody in the Book of Revelation. Note the following selective examples:

- a) The beast possesses 'ten horns and seven heads' (13:1), and Christ 'the Lamb' possesses 'seven horns and seven eyes' (5:6).
- b) The beast's power, throne and authority comes from the dragon, i.e. Satan (13:2, 4), and Christ is given power, throne and authority from God (2:28; 3:21).
- c) The beast is described as possessing a mortal wound that has been healed (13:3) which parallels the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. 1:18; 2:8).
- d) The return (second coming or *parousia*) of the beast who is to ascend from the pit (17:8, 11) parallels the awaited return of Christ ('I am coming': 2:5, 16; 3:11).
- e) Related to this is the fact that the beast 'was and is not and is to come' (17:8) forms a rough parallel to the phrase 'he who was and is and is to come' (1:4, 8;

4:8).

f) The beast is worshipped by men (13:4) as is the Lamb (5:8-14).

Why does the author adopt this technique? Nero/the beast is the agent of Satan, whereas Christ is the agent of God. The return of the beast also signifies the appearance of the Antichrist and that the end is near. The other aim is to demonstrate that ultimately the beast will have no power over Christ, for the Lamb will conquer the beast (15:2). Despite the view that Rome is in sole control, the readers of Revelation are offered the message of consolation that God and Christ will gain a final victory over Rome.