

THE BEAST OUT OF THE SEA

REVELATION 13

Daniel and Revelation Series

OPENING PRAYER

Creator God, open our hearts to your Spirit of Truth, so that through these texts, our discussion and our prayer, we will hear the voice of your living Word. Through this Bible study, may our minds be renewed and our desire for your Kingdom quickened. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

EXEGESIS

Revelation is part of the apocalyptic tradition (as parts of the book of Daniel are), the purpose of which is to draw back the curtain and reveal the true nature of things. Revelation may at first glance read like a confusing fantasy novel, but when placed in the context of the 1st century Roman Empire it becomes startlingly relevant to the contemporary church.

A red dragon, named as Satan in chapter 12, summons two beasts to form a diabolical trinity. The first beast represents the imperial power and violence of Rome. It rises from the sea - Rome is a coastal city. Its ten heads represent client kings, its seven heads the Caesars and hills of Rome, as revealed in chapter 17. The whole earth follows and worships the beast - the Roman Empire was considered to span the entirety of the known world. Caesar is revealed, not as a beneficent ruler and deity, but as a beast that murders those faithful to the true God. The whole world cries 'Who can stand against [the beast]?' Is this a shout of victory or a cry of despair?

The work of the second beast is deception. It is symbolic of the Imperial propaganda machine, the 'bread and circuses' of Roman popular appeasement. Violence alone cannot maintain social order; the cult of Emperor worship was vital to Rome's social glue. Images of Caesar were everywhere, on coins, in temples and on the street. The imperial cult blended with the imperial economy - you could not trade in the markets without acknowledging Caesar as Lord, for Roman currency contained the mark of the beast, the image of Caesar.

Roman imperial policy tolerated the worship of other deities, as long as Caesar was acknowledged as the 'Son of God'. Refusal to do so threatened the fabric of imperial social order. John is emphasising to the first century church that to claim to follow Jesus yet pay homage to Caesar is idolatrous.

Many meanings have been attached to the number 666 over the centuries, but in Hebrew gematria (where letters are given numerical values, and words are represented by the sum of their letters), the Greek for Nero Caesar, when translated into Hebrew, adds up to 666. This is a number symbolic of imperial power and violence.

REFLECTION

When searching for modern equivalents to the propaganda of Ancient Rome, we might think of Hitler's Nuremberg Rallies, or the cult of personality surrounding Kim Il-sung in North Korea. These extreme examples may lead us in 21st century Britain to think the work of the beast is consigned to history or the other side of the globe. Is this really the case?

In the UK we have a civic religion, including a highly ceremonial, pseudo-Christian Remembrance Sunday every year that honours those who died to 'save' us. Does this tempt us to attribute saving power to the bullet and nuclear missile instead of God alone?

The powers of the global market also compete for our allegiance, using a whole arsenal of subtle tricks such as product placement in films. The power of public relations is evident when you see countless people queuing through the night to purchase a new and expensive gadget that differs only slightly from the previous model.

Jesus tells his disciples to be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. We must open our eyes to the ways in which the modern powers of domination seek to deceive us, and withdraw ourselves from their grip.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What other examples of modern idolatry can you identify?
2. Where do you feel propaganda is at work, whether blatant or subtle, in our society?
3. Are you aware of the forces that shape your own opinions and desires?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, Ruler of the Universe, may we grow together as a discerning people, wise to all the diversions from your Way. May the strength of our faith enable us to challenge the powerful, speak up for the oppressed, and open the eyes of those who can't tell the difference.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Michael J. Gorman, 'Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation Paperback' by (2011)
- Walter Wink, 'The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium' (1999)

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