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Revelation Text 08: Chapter 12-15b



I finished the previous unit at the end of chapter 12 with the dragon standing on the sand of the sea, furious but ineffective, and in need of a new strategy. Now, in chapter 13, we find out what that new strategy is.

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It is a beast that rises out of the sea. Again, we are reminded of the cosmic battle myths of the ancient world, where dragons and the personified, roaring sea were closely associated with each other or even equated, and posed a mighty threat to organized life in the cosmos and even to the gods themselves.

However, this beast is a human beast, and the sea is not the primordial ocean that preceded creation. Rev. 17:15 tell us that the waters are peoples and nations, and this is probably true here as well. The beast emerges out of the sea of nations; it is human evil. John has given the mythic image a completely new meaning. This is not mythology but an analysis of the human world, re-using mythology as imagery.

Notice that the beast looks a lot like the dragon; it is almost a human copy (or perhaps incarnation?) of the dragon.

Kimon Berlin (2006), *La Bête de la Mer* (Tapisserie de l'Apocalypse) / *The Beast of the Sea* (Tapestry of the Apocalypse),

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_B%C3%AAt_e_de_la_Mer.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0

And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. (Rev. 13:2 ESV)



Kimón Berlin (2006), La Bête de la Mer, CC BY-SA 3.0

The beast combines features of a leopard, a bear, and a lion, three of the four animals mentioned in Daniel 7, and it is itself the fourth beast in Daniel. The four animals in Daniel 7 represent four kingdoms or empires and their kings. No doubt this is also true for the beast of Revelation 13.

As shown in this tapestry (notice the staff that is passed on), the dragon gives great authority to the beast.

Kimón Berlin (2006), La Bête de la Mer (Tapisserie de l'Apocalypse) / The Beast of the Sea (Tapestry of the Apocalypse),

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One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. (Rev. 13:3 ESV)



Kimon Berlin (2006), La Bête de la Mer, CC BY-SA 3.0

“One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast” (Rev. 13:3).

There are different ideas about what this means, too many to cover here. Perhaps it refers to the years of civil war in the Roman Empire in the late 60s of the first century, a period in which it seemed a real possibility that the empire would not survive. Or perhaps it refers to the resilience of empires in general. Regardless of its precise meaning, it unmasks the beast as ...

Kimon Berlin (2006), La Bête de la Mer (Tapisserie de l'Apocalypse) / The Beast of the Sea (Tapestry of the Apocalypse),
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False Messiah

... a pseudo-lamb and a false Messiah. It mimics the lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered. This is a false, counterfeit Messiah offering a false, counterfeit salvation. Such was the claim of Rome: it had brought peace to the world.

QUIS UT DEUS?

Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?

(Rev. 13:4 ESV)



Jaletzke (2007), Erzengel Michael, Universität Bonn Haupteingang, CC BY-SA 3.0

The false claim of the beast leads people to worship the beast, saying: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (Rev. 13:4 ESV). Ironically, this statement parallels the name of the angelic warrior in chapter 12, Michael. *Michael* means *who is like God*. The Latin words on the shield of Michael in the illustration read QUIS UT DEUS? This is the meaning of his name translated into Latin. Who is like God?

We have already seen that the dragon was not able to succeed against Michael. The people worshipping the beast have it all wrong; it is quite clear who is greater than the beast and can fight against it; that question was answered in chapter 12. The rhetorical question, who is like the beast, is therefore a blasphemous claim.

Michael Jaletzke (2007), Erzengel Michael, Universität Bonn Haupteingang, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michael4.jpg>, CC BY-SA 3.0

Blasphemy

Notice the repetition of the word *blasphemy* in the text. The beast is marked by blasphemous names in verse 1 and blasphemous words in verses 5 and 6. In the introduction, I pointed to statues of emperors that present them as more than human. *Augustus* means exalted one, a title added to Octavian's name when he became emperor; how exalted is an open question. Because Julius Caesar had been declared a god, Augustus was referred to as the son of the divinized. An emperor could also be referred to as saviour. Increasingly, it became normal to speak or think of the emperor as divine.

Dominus et deus noster

Domitian, the emperor most likely reigning when Revelation was written, was at times addressed as *dominus et deus noster*, Latin for our lord and god.

- It looks like the dragon
- It is worshipped (like emperor)
- Mortal wound: pseudo-lamb
- Dan. 7: Beast is kingdom, empire, ruler



Kimon Berlin (2006), La Bête de la Mer, CC BY-SA 3.0

In summary: the beast looks like the dragon.

It is worshipped (like the emperor).

Its mortal wound shows it to be a pseudo-lamb, a false redeemer.

Based on Daniel 7, a beast like this is to be understood as a kingdom, an empire, and its ruler.

So who would the first readers have understood to be the beast? There can be only one answer.

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_B%C3%AAtte_de_la_Mer.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0

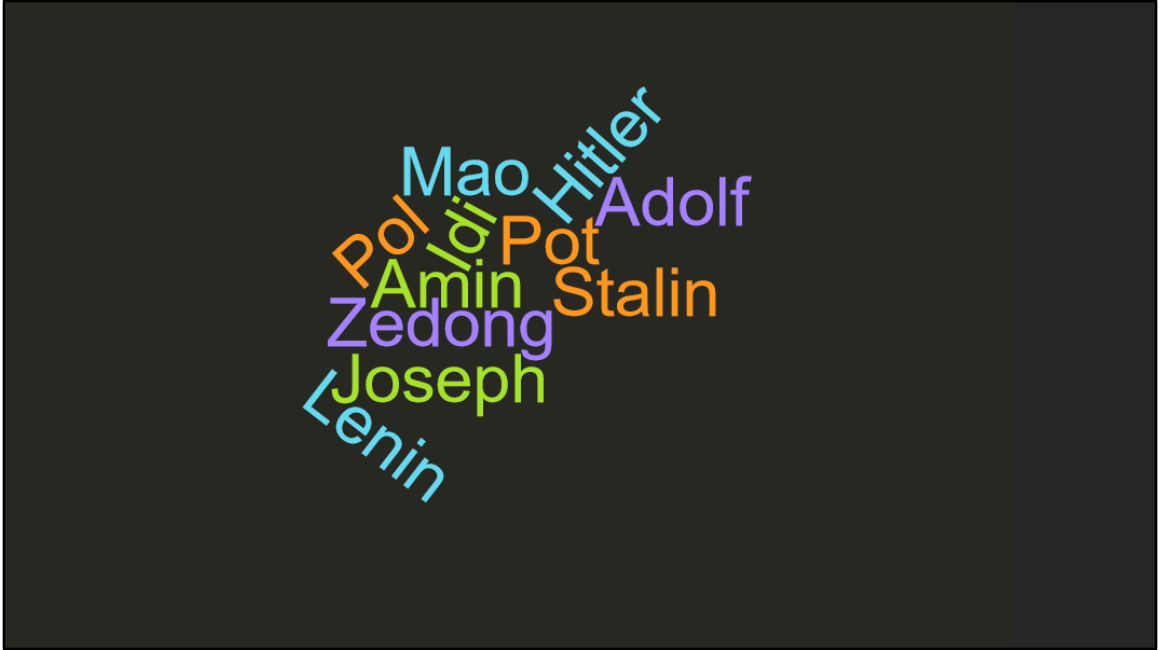


The Roman Empire and its ruler, the emperor. At the same time, although Rome certainly is a manifestation of the beast, this does not exhaust the idea. There is more to the beast than only Rome. There have been other manifestations of this idea. I therefore propose this definition:

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The beast is totalitarian government and ideology, demanding total allegiance

The beast is totalitarian government and ideology (or religion), demanding total allegiance, or allegiance and devotion beyond what is proper for human authorities.



We have seen numerous examples of this in the 20th century. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, Idi Amin...

It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It ... makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast. (Rev. 13:11f ESV)



In 13:11, there is another beast. This one has two horns, so it looks like a lamb, but it speaks like the dragon. Again, we are dealing with a false gospel and counterfeit salvation. This second beast makes people worship the first beast, as shown in this illustration from the year 1545.

To this end, so we are told, it performs great signs and even makes the image of the beast speak. In the original context, this was the imperial priesthood, those priests that served in the cult of the emperor. Probably, it also includes other institutions, such as the guilds, that upheld and fortified the idolatrous social structures.

We know that priests used tricks to impress the worshippers. Some statues in temples had a tube that went down into the basement, where a priest would hide and use the tube to speak to worshippers as if the god himself was speaking through the image.

This second beast will look different with each manifestation of the beast (in the case of communism and national socialism, it looked more like the ruling political party), but there always is a system in place to manage people's devotion.

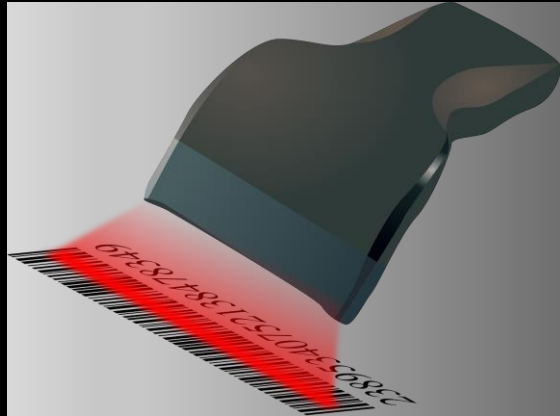
The second beast provides all worshippers with a mark. Without the mark, it is impossible to buy or sell; people are excluded from economic life and activity.

John Bale, 1545,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1545_Bale_Revelation_Chapter_13.jpg,

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Visible?

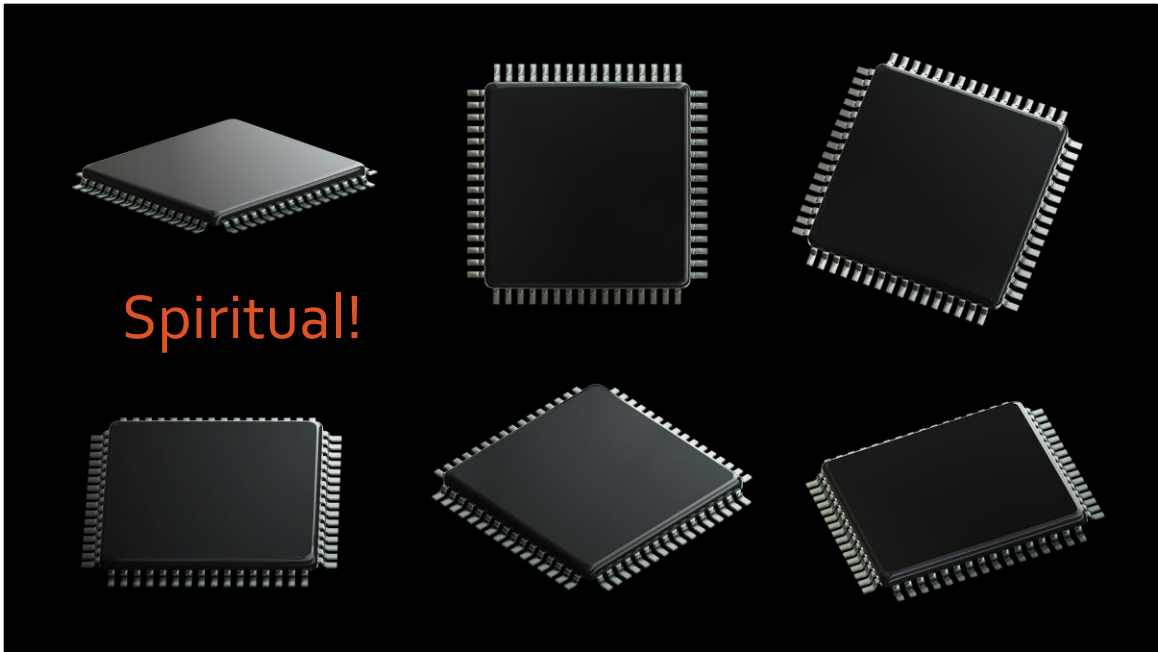


So what is this mark? Is it visible? In the ancient world, slaves, soldiers, and devout worshippers of a god would sometimes be branded. For slaves, this mark indicated ownership. In other cases, it identified people as followers. This helps us to understand the background of the image. But it is unlikely John expected a literal sign or mark to be used.

Still, even though the mark is not meant as a literal mark, it may occasionally take a more concrete form. The closest we get to this in the days of the Roman Empire is that during some of the most severe persecutions, people would sometimes receive a certificate of emperor worship, to prove that they had fulfilled their religious duties to the emperor.

Under communism, many professions were closed to Christians. As were the universities. There was, and is, a price to pay for being a Christian; there were, and are, consequences, in part economic ones. And oppressive states will find ways to control their subjects. Think China.

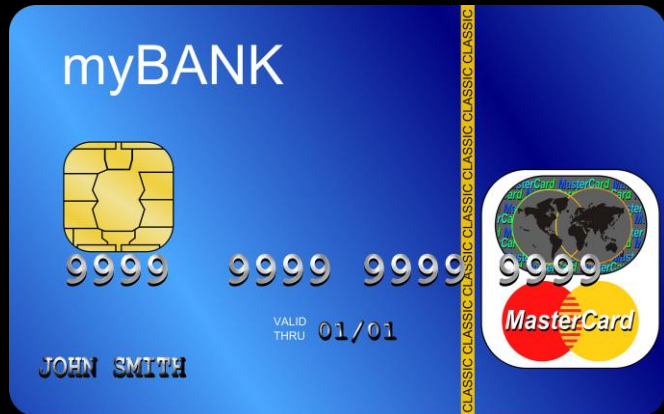
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However, the seal in Revelation 7 is spiritual and invisible. Surely, the mark is not primarily a physical or visible reality either, but a spiritual one. Both the mark and the seal signify ownership and signify the one to whom allegiance is given. Some Christians have worried about every new technology whether this might be the mark of the beast, whether barcodes or chips, to mention two of the more recent options. But it is not about technology.

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Worship!



And it is important to understand that one does not receive this mark by accident. No one wakes up one morning to realise they have inadvertently accepted the mark of the beast and now are lost. What is at stake is worship. The question is, whom do you worship? To whom do you give allegiance?

The mark of the beast is first and foremost a matter of the heart, although it may at times take a more physical form.

At this point, it may be helpful to point out that in verse 17, the mark is defined as the name of the beast or the number of its name.

Notice that in 14:1, the 144,000 have the name of the lamb and of his father on their foreheads, an exact parallel. A further parallel is the promise in 3:12, "I will write on him the name of my God, ... and my own new name." And in 22:4, in the new Jerusalem, all the servants of the lamb have his name on their foreheads. All of this confirms that we are primarily to think of invisible realities.

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666: Gematria or Symbolism?

The mark is a name, but also a number, that of his name. The number is given in verse 18: 666, followed by a call for wisdom: calculate the number! What does this mean? There are two ways to go in our interpretation, either something that is called *gematria* or symbolism.

Gematria is based on the fact that letters can also serve as numbers and therefore have a numerical value. It is therefore possible to replace the letters with numbers, add them up, and so come up with the number of a word.



ABC: 1+2+3=6

A simple example: ABC might become $1+2+3=6$.

In the case of *gematria*, the question becomes: Which name has the numerical value of 666? Over the centuries, many names have been proposed. Most of these candidates are now dead, and they were not the beast. This renders John's hint somewhat less than helpful.

Interestingly, the numerical value of the Greek word *beast* turns out to be 666. But then, knowing this does not really help us any further either, does it?

NRWN QSR

N 50
R 200
W 6
N 50

Q 100 (*yodh* missing)
S 60
R 200

The oldest identification that we know identifies the name as *Nero*, or more precisely, as *Neron Qaisar*. And it needs to be transliterated into the Hebrew alphabet (remember that the NT is written in Greek, but we do not get 666 if we use the numerical value of Greek letters). Then it adds up to 666. If we leave out the letter *yodh* following the letter *qoph*, a spelling of Nero's name that is not attested in Hebrew.

nrwn qsr

n 50

r 200

w 6

n 50

q 100 (*yodh* missing)

s 60

[The Latin spelling would exclude the second 'n' and lower the number to 616. Some manuscripts have indeed 616 instead of 666, suggesting their copyist did think it referred to Nero.]

Most likely, Nero was dead by the time Revelation was written. But he was the first emperor to persecute Christians. Even though this persecution did not last long and was limited to the city of Rome, it was ferocious and cruel. Nero could therefore function as a sort of prototype of persecuting emperors and other tyrants, a prototype of the beast. In other words: beware of an emperor like Nero.

However, this name calculation seems far-fetched (why do we need to add *Caesar* and transliterate into Hebrew? And use an unfamiliar spelling?). In verse 18, John is not calling for mathematical skill but wisdom; what is needed is not calculus but discernment.

Symbolic

6 is a human number

6 is one short of perfection (7)

3 is a divine number

3x6 claims to be divine

More likely then, the number is to be understood symbolically.

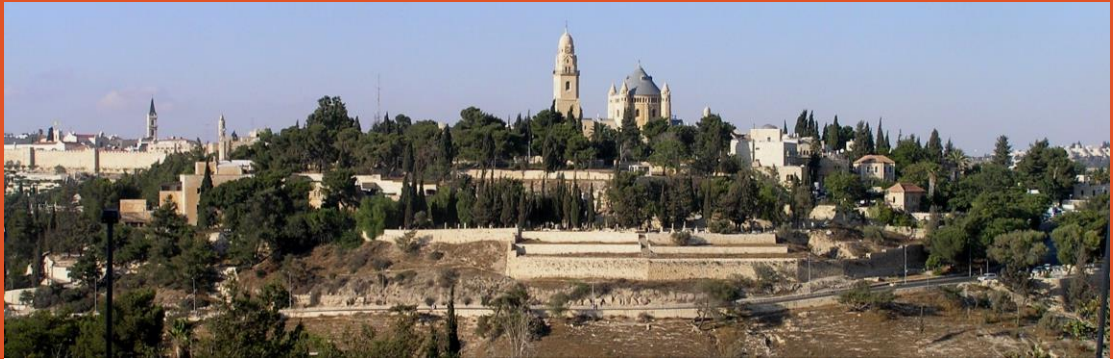
6 is a human number; humans were created on the sixth day.

6 is one short of perfection (7).

3 is a divine number.

3x6 claims to be divine.

In other words: 666 stands for a human claiming divine prerogatives or even divine nature. In this view, the warning sign to look for is a human ruler or government overstepping its boundaries and demanding allegiance or devotion beyond what is proper for human beings. This is certainly what the emperors did.



144,000

In the next scene, in chapter 14, we get to see the 144,000 again. Even though the beast has now had its chance to rule and conquer, there still are 144,000; not one is missing. It still is the full number of God's people.

They are standing here on Mount Zion. It is another exodus scene. When Israel came out of Egypt, they stopped at Mount Sinai; here, it is Mount Zion.

In contrast to those who received the mark of the beast and therefore carry the beast's name on their foreheads, the 144,000 have the name of Jesus and God the father (verse 1). They are fully committed; verse 4: they follow the lamb wherever he goes.

This also explains why they are described as virgins in verse 4. They are not monks. This is not about celibacy or physical relations; it refers to spiritual reality and speaks of their total devotion to Jesus. This is the virgin bride.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:MtZion_from_Abu_Tor.jpg, CC0

Three angels:
Last call & warning



Next, starting in 14:6, we have a sequence of seven angels. The first three bring something like a final call and a last, stern warning.

Number four, the one in the middle, is described in 14:14 as one like a son of man. Elsewhere, this describes Jesus, but since another angel gives a command to him, it is more likely to be an angel as well. The remaining three angels are introduced in verses 15, 17, and 18.

Grain harvest?



With these additional three angels, we have reached scene number six, and once again it is about judgement, here in the form of a double harvest. The harvest in verse 16 is not further identified but it may be the grain harvest, an image of gathering in the redeemed.

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Grape harvest

The second harvest is described in 17-20. This is the grape harvest. The grapes are thrown into “the great wine press of the wrath of God” (14:19). This is an image of judgement we also find in some of the OT prophets.

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The wine press is trodden and blood flows as high as the bridle of a horse for 1600 stadia. This is an unimaginable bloodbath. Taken literally, this would be over 300 km far...

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$$1600 = 4 \times 4 \times 10 \times 10$$

...but the number is no doubt symbolic: 4 (the number of the earth) x4x10x10. This judgement concerns the entire earth.

SEVEN PLAGUES

(which are the last)

15:1 is a little bit like the interludes that we had as part of the seven seals and the seven trumpets. It does not fit this sequence but is a preview, a look ahead at what is still coming: seven plagues, which are the last. It points forward to the next series of seven.



Scene number seven takes us beyond the end. John sees a sea of glass mingled with fire and those who have conquered the beast beside the sea. The beast looks frightening in chapter 13, but the evil leading to the persecution of God's people is only temporary.

The scene is yet another exodus image. It shows the multitude of the redeemed who have come out of this world, crossing the sea, which in this case is the heavenly sea, the waters above, and the firmament, much like in Genesis 1. They sing the song of Moses and the song of the lamb, like Israel did in Exodus 15, after it came out of Egypt and Pharaoh's army had been destroyed in the flood. This is a victory celebration.

It is done!

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Revelation Text 08: Chapter 12-15b

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