

BEAST OF AN EMPIRE

“And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. 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 13:1-2).

The beast that rises from the sea is one of the most captivating and frightening images in John’s Revelation. What was John portraying with such imagery, and whose power and authority was he referring to? We’ll need to consult a Bible dictionary and other ancient texts to gain insight into this passage.

Use a Bible Dictionary for Background Knowledge

By consulting a resource like the *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, we can gain insight into the historical context of this passage. John’s readers were located in the Roman province of Asia Minor, and it’s likely that they identified John’s beast with the Roman Empire or one of its emperors. In Revelation 13, John is challenging the Roman emperor’s “goodwill” as well as the “peace” he maintained.

Consult Other Ancient Texts

We can also consult ancient texts, like 4 *Ezra* 11-13 and 2 *Baruch* 39, that would have developed similar critiques of Roman rule and expressed similar hope

for God to intervene and end Rome’s oppression. These texts identify the fourth beast in Daniel’s vision of world empires (see Dan 7) with the Roman Empire. This was a change from earlier Jewish readings of Daniel, which understood the fourth beast to represent the Hellenistic kingdoms that arose after Alexander’s death. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, Jewish authors began to identify the last beast in Daniel’s visions as their Roman conquerors (4 *Ezra* 12:11-12; 2 *Baruch* 39:5-7).

John goes further than merely reinterpreting the fourth beast as Rome. He creates a new monster—a hybrid of all four beasts in Daniel’s visions—to depict the empire. To John, this beast is the successor to all preceding kingdoms and the heir of all their evils. When he speaks of an empire having “authority ... over every tribe and people and language and nation” (Rev 13:7), his audience would have seen this as a reference to the Roman Empire. They were originally diverse peoples and languages that were overtaken by the power of Rome. This understanding is supported by another ancient Greek text, the *Moralia*. In this text, Plutarch, a near-contemporary of John, celebrated the rise of the empire that united the Mediterranean region and attached “to herself not only nations and peoples but foreign kingdoms beyond the sea.” Plutarch spoke of Rome ushering in “a single, unwavering cycle and world order of peace” (*Moralia*, 317). Hence, John says it was viewed as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18).

John’s description of the great beast recovering from a “death blow” would have resonated with impressions of Rome (13:3, 12, 14). The author of 4 *Ezra* describes a murmuring in the belly of his eagle-beast—a sign of the eagle’s destruction; however, it’s something from which the eagle also recovers (12:17-18). This is likely a reference to a year-long civil war that erupted after Nero’s suicide in 68 AD. In this battle for the emperor’s throne, Rome’s collapse seemed imminent.

Exposing Imperial Worship

Why does John use this imagery? He was addressing claims made on behalf of, and sometimes by, Roman emperors (13:1, 5-6). Emperors were worshiped alongside Greek and Roman gods and regarded as agents of peace and prosperity. The emperors’ “right” to receive worship was widely proclaimed. Temples and coinage served as memorials to their benevolence and power, particularly in areas like the cities of Asia Minor in which we find the seven churches.

John strips away the public veneer of the imperial cult, claiming that Satan (the dragon) gave his authority and power (13:2) to Emperor Domitian (the beast). This resulted in people worshiping Satan along with the emperor (13:4), which was commonly understood by the Jewish authors of that time (see *Baruch* 4:6-7; 1 Cor 10:14, 19-21; Rev 9:20-21). Roman rule and the worship of its emperors were seen as part of Satan’s campaign against God—a principal sign of his deception of humanity.

John opposes the worship of anyone besides God, His Messiah and His Spirit, and he seeks to motivate his listeners to reject the imperial cult. Our response today should be similar. We should oppose evil empires that demand our worship—in whatever form. 

Biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).



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Taming the Beast

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Thoughts from the Church Fathers 

The imagery used to describe the end-times beast of Revelation—with its “ten horns and seven heads,” bear-like feet and lion-sized mouth—isn’t unique to biblical authors (Rev 13:1-2). It’s also found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a text popular with the early church that wrestles with questions like repentance. In an episode reminiscent of Revelation 13, Hermas finds himself on a road blocked by a horrific-looking beast. He has just been admonished not to be double-minded, but to keep his focus on the Lord. This meeting ends in a surprising way. It demonstrates that holding fast to faith shapes your perspective—even making a mighty beast seem diminutive and childlike.

“And I approached a little further, brothers, and behold, I saw dust ascend into heaven, and I began to say to myself, ‘Maybe cattle are coming and raising dust?’ ... As the dust grew greater and greater, I suspected it was something supernatural. The sun shone a little, and behold, I saw a large beast like some sea monster and fiery locusts were coming out of its mouth. And the beast was about one hundred feet in length and its head was like a ceramic jar. And I began to weep and to ask the Lord that He rescue me from it, and I remembered the word which I had heard, ‘Do not be of two minds, Hermas.’ ... Having put on the faith of the Lord, and remembering what great things He taught me and, taking courage, I gave myself over to the beast. And thus the beast came with a whoosh. ... I came near it, and the enormous sea monster stretched itself out on the ground. And it only stuck out its tongue, and did not move at all until I had passed it by.”¹

The Shepherd of Hermas, thought to be an example of apocalyptic literature, was likely written in two parts, the first in 90-100 AD and the second in 100-154 AD.² *Hermas* was even included in *Codex Sinaiticus*, an important fourth-century Bible that also contained some writings from the Apostolic Fathers.

For more resources on the church fathers, visit Logos.com/ChurchHistory.

Pick up Rick Brannan’s *The Apostolic Fathers Greek-English Interlinear* at Logos.com/AFInterlinear.

¹ *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision IV, i, 5-10 (22.5-10). Author’s own translation.

² Clayton N. Jefford, ed., *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 134.