

Revelation Chapter 13: The Two Beasts

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Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Revelation 13, Two Beasts, Dragon, Emperor Cult, Roman Empire, Mark of the Beast, 666, False Prophet, Persecution, Perseverance

Abstract

In this lecture on Revelation Chapter 13, Dr. Dave Mathewson interprets the two beasts as demonically inspired agents of Satan through which the Roman Empire and local provincial authorities enforced imperial worship and persecuted early Christians. He demonstrates how the first beast claims universal divine allegiance and blasphemes God, while the second beast—later identified as the false prophet—uses deception, miraculous signs, and economic sanctions through the mark of the beast to enforce conformity to pagan rule. Mathewson addresses the enigmatic number 666, framing it not as a tool for modern technological speculation, but as an apocalyptic symbol of ultimate human imperfection or an allusion to Nero's evil spirit designed to grant first-century readers spiritual discernment. Ultimately, this apocalyptic vision provides believers with the essential spiritual insight needed to resist compromise with state idolatry and maintain faithful endurance during times of tribulation.

Outline

I. Introduction to Revelation 13 and the Context of the Two Beasts

- A. Connection to Revelation 12: Satanic warfare transitioned from the dragon to earthly beasts
- B. The Two Beasts as Satanic Agents
 - 1. Beast #1: Embodiment of universal state power (Roman Empire and Emperor)
 - 2. Beast #2: Provincial enforcement mechanism (Asia Minor authorities and False Prophet)
- C. Concurrent Timeline of 42 Months / 3.5 Years / 1,260 Days
 - 1. Represents a designated period of testing, tribulation, and divine protection for the church
 - 2. Describes simultaneous aspects of the present age rather than sequential chronological events

II. The First Beast: The Roman Empire and Imperial Absolutism (Rev. 13:1–8)

- A. Claims Universal Worship and Allegiance
 - 1. Arrogant self-exaltation of state power claiming divine honors
 - 2. Universal awe and submission: "Who is like the beast, and who can make war against him?"
 - 3. Perverted parody of Yahweh praise from the Old Testament (Exodus 15:11; Isaiah 44:7; Psalm 89:10)

B. Blasphemy Against God and His Dwelling

1. Direct allusion to the arrogant horn of Daniel 7:6–8
2. Reflected in emperor cult demands and divine titles claimed by rulers such as Domitian

C. Making War with the Saints

1. Unveils the demonic origin behind Christian persecution and hardship in Asia Minor
2. Direct execution of dragon's hostility against the offspring of the woman

D. Universal Authority and God's Ultimate Sovereignty

1. Universal rule described in apocalyptic hyperbole to highlight Rome's total earthly dominance
2. Rome as the first-century historical expression of world-powers opposing God's reign
3. Divine restraint ("it was given"): Satan and the beast operate strictly under divine permission

III. Excursus on Discernment and Patient Endurance (Rev. 13:9–10)

A. Transitional Insertion Between the Descriptions of the First and Second Beast

B. Call for Spiritual Discernment ("He who has an ear, let him hear")

1. Echoes warnings given to the seven churches (Rev. 2–3) and Jesus' parables
2. Focuses on moral and spiritual response rather than speculative timeline calculations

C. Call for Faithful Endurance Under Persecution

1. Allusions to Jeremiah 15:2 and 43:11 regarding inevitable captivity and suffering
2. Spiritual perspective empowers believers to endure without resorting to compromise or violence

IV. The Second Beast: Local Enforcement, Deception, and Economic Sanctions (Rev. 13:11–17)

A. Identity and Function of the Second Beast

1. Acts on behalf of the first beast to enforce imperial worship in provincial Asia Minor
2. Identified later in Revelation as the "False Prophet" (Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10)
3. Deceptive appearance: possesses two horns like a lamb (parody of Christ) but speaks like a dragon
4. Represents local civic officials, temple wardens, and provincial leadership enforcing state religion

B. Mechanisms of Deception

1. Extension of Satan's ancient deceptive activity (Genesis 3; Rev. 12:9)
2. Performs impressive signs: calling fire from heaven (Elijah parody) and animating the beast's image
3. Symbolizes Rome's overwhelming ideological, political, and propaganda power
4. Parallel connection to false teachers within churches tempting Christians to compromise (Rev. 2)

C. The Mark of the Beast and Economic Coercion

1. Enforced involvement in local imperial temples and civic trade guild ceremonies
2. The Mark on forehead or hand as a satanic parody of God's seal on the 144,000 (Rev. 7; 14; 22)
3. Symbolizes ownership, identity, allegiance, and social belonging to the state system
4. Economic boycott: restriction on buying and selling for those refusing allegiance
5. Historical reality illustrated in local churches: poor Smyrna (faithful) vs. wealthy Laodicea (compromised)

V. Calculating the Number of the Beast: 666 (Rev. 13:18)

A. Nature of the Call to Calculate

1. A demand for spiritual wisdom and discernment rather than sensational end-times decoding
2. Intended to provide practical moral clarity for John's original first-century readers

B. Hermeneutical Principles for Interpreting 666

1. First-century accessibility: the symbol had to be meaningful to John's contemporary audience
2. Rejection of modern technological fulfillments (barcodes, credit cards, microchips, computer chips)

C. Primary Interpretive Options for 666

1. Ancient practice of Gematria (assigning numerical values to alphabetic letters)
2. Nero Caesar Connection:
 - a. Hebrew transliteration (*Neron Kaisar*) totals 666 under specific spelling
 - b. Nero functions as an archetype of monstrous state evil resurfacing in Domitian
3. Symbolic Number of Fallen Humanity:
 - a. Triadic repetition of 6 continuously falling short of the divine perfection of 777
 - b. Represents ultimate human imperfection, fallen political power, and idolatrous pride

VI. Conclusion and Theological Application

A. Unveiling the True Spiritual Reality of Empire

1. Exposes the demonic inspiration behind oppressive state worship and economic coercion
2. Re-frames Christian struggles as spiritual warfare against heavenly principalities

B. The Imperative for the Church

1. Serves as a sharp wake-up call against cultural accommodation, complacency, and compromise
2. Provides believers with the spiritual insight required for steadfast perseverance and faithful witness