

THE SEVEN-HEADED BEAST OF REVELATION 17

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One of the serious challenges of the book of Revelation is how to interpret the seven-headed beast of Rev 17. The interpretation, naturally, is affected by the presuppositions which one brings to the text. Consequently, a great variety of interpretations have been put forth, each reflecting the particular presuppositions which the interpreter has brought. It is my purpose to attempt to avoid external presuppositions as far as possible, listening closely to the text and reading it as far as possible within its own internal context. I realize, of course, the impossibility of coming to the text with no presuppositions whatsoever; however, I hope to consciously avoid insofar as possible letting such presuppositions influence the interpretation. Therefore, there will be few references to the literature in this article, since the purpose is to listen as closely as possible to the text without introducing the bias brought by previous interpreters.

Listening to the Text

In interpreting the book of Revelation it is imperative to take the claims of the text at face value if we hope to understand what the author was intending to communicate, since he would have expected his readers and hearers to take them at face value. I do not mean that the symbolic language should be taken literally, but that John's claims and intentions should be taken seriously. When he states that he saw and heard things that pertain to the readers' future, we should interpret the text accordingly. This is the case particularly with regard to the visions recorded from 4:1 (*deixō soi ha dei genesthai meta tauta*: "I will show you what must take place after this"¹) to the end of the book. In other words, these visions pertain to events which John was instructed would take place between his day and the eschaton. Each of the visions from 4:1 through 14:20 appear to cover events which would take place in historical time, since they pertain to the historical future and culminate with eschatological events associated with the Parousia. The sixth seal brings the reader to the eschaton (6:14-17), and the seventh seal occurs in

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

eschatological time (8:1). The seventh trumpet announces the end of history and the beginning of the reign of God (11:15-18). The vision recorded in chaps. 12-14 also ends with the Parousia, specifically, the two harvests, gathering the righteous for Christ's kingdom and destroying the wicked (14:14-20).

There is a change that takes place in the subsequent visions. From 15:1 onward, each of the visions appears to be purely eschatological in nature. There are no historical events that transpire under these visions. Although there is a brief historical reference in 17:10 ("Five have fallen, one is"), this is given only for the purpose of making an identification of the symbol, not by way of pointing to any actual historical events. Therefore, the visions from 15:1 to the end of the book should not be interpreted historically, but eschatologically. This means that the vision of the judgment of the Harlot City, Babylon, in chaps. 17-18, which is a further explication of the fall of Babylon under the seventh vial (16:17-21), should not be interpreted as depicting historical events, for it relates to eschatological events. That does not mean that the symbols there portrayed have no historical role, since the text makes clear that they do; rather, it is not historical events that are portrayed in Rev 17. It is a portrayal of the judgment of the great Harlot (17:1).

Having said that, it must be admitted that the symbols themselves are interpreted to John by the angelic interpreter in terms that permit him to make a partial historical identification. When the angel tells John that five of the seven heads of the Beast have fallen and one has an ongoing existence (17:10), John is enabled to locate his own historical situation with relation to that of the Beast. He knows that five of the powers represented by the seven heads are already past history, and it is the sixth head of the Beast which is in power in his day. One head remains to come to power at some future point, then the Beast himself will rule as an eighth king, in the consecutive line of the seven (v. 11). Finally, the Beast will go to perdition or destruction (vv. 8,11). We will return to this matter later.

Rev 17 is not the first time John records seeing a beast with seven heads and ten horns. He saw similar beasts in chaps. 12 and 13. Can it be that there are three different beasts that are very similar in their particulars? Let us evaluate the similarities.

The Seven-headed Dragon of Rev 12

In 12:3 John saw a great fiery-red Dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. This Dragon came from heaven (vv. 4-5,7-10,12-13) and stood before the Woman who was about to give birth to the Male Child to attempt to destroy the Child as soon as it was born (v. 4). Verse 9 tells the reader that this Dragon, or Serpent, is a symbol that represents the devil, or Satan, who was cast out of heaven for his rebellion against Michael. The text does not tell what the seven heads and ten horns represent, but it seems reasonable, according to the principles of biblical interpretation and the unity and interconnectivity of the book of Revelation, that they do not represent something different here in chap. 12

from what they do in chap. 17, namely, kings or kingdoms. In other words, the Dragon, a power of celestial origin, accomplishes his work on earth through his heads and horns, which are the ruling powers of earth. Thus, when the Dragon figuratively stands before the Woman to devour her Manchild as soon as He is born, it is one of the heads, which rule consecutively (17:10), that is acting on behalf of the Dragon. So the crowns (*diadēmata*, signs of royal authority and rulership) are shown to be on the heads in this vision, signifying that the period represented is that during which the heads are ruling consecutively, as opposed to the portrayal in 13:1 in which the crowns are on the ten horns, which rule contemporaneously at a later period (17:12-13). Since the activity of the Dragon in 12:3-4 involves a failed attempt to destroy the Manchild at His birth, it is reasonable to assume that the head or kingdom which is portrayed as acting on behalf of the Dragon is imperial Rome, represented by its client king Herod the Great at Jesus' birth and by its governor Pilate at His trial and crucifixion. Notwithstanding the Dragon's attempts to destroy Him, the Messianic Child "was snatched up to God and to his throne" (12:5), and the Dragon turned his anger against the Woman and her other offspring (vv. 6,13-17).

In short, we have in chap. 12, a beast represented as both a dragon and a serpent (cf. vv. 9,14). It existed in heaven before it was cast to the earth following a rebellion against the powers of heaven, represented by Michael (vv. 7-8). It is called "the ancient serpent, called the devil, or Satan" (v. 9). Its work on earth is to persecute and attempt to destroy the Woman (vv. 13-16) and her offspring, both the Manchild (vv. 4-5) and "the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (v. 17). It does its nefarious work on earth through its heads or earthly civil and political powers, which are shown as wearing crowns, or ruling (v. 3).

The work of the Dragon in this passage encompasses the whole period of human history and beyond, signaling the reader that this story encapsulates the whole of the great conflict between good and evil, which began in heaven (vv. 7-9; cf. vv. 3, 12) and was brought to this earth when Satan and his angels were cast out of heaven into the earth. The imagery of the serpent of old who deceived the whole world (v. 9) and who seeks to destroy the seed of the Woman clearly points back to the story of the Fall and the entrance of sin and death in Gen 3, along with the curse on the serpent and the promise of the Messianic Seed in Gen 3:15. The imagery of the Woman being given two wings of a great eagle to fly into the wilderness where God had prepared a place for her to be protected from the attacks of the Dragon/Serpent, along with the swallowing up of the devouring flood of water (Rev 12:14-16), reminds the reader of the escape of Israel from Egypt and their crossing of the Red Sea, even of the Jordan River (Exod 19:4; Ezek 29:3; Ps 106:9-10; Isa 11:15-16; Josh 4:23). The imagery of the birth of the Manchild who would rule all nations with a rod of iron, and His being caught up to God and to His throne (Rev 12:5), point to the birth of the Messiah (Ps 2:1-9; Isa 9:6-7) and His victorious resurrection and ascension to heaven (John 20:17; Heb 12:2; Rev

3:21). The imagery of the inbreaking of salvation accompanied by the second overthrow of Satan, the Accuser (Rev 12:10), and the defeat of the Accuser through the blood of the Lamb (v. 11), point to the salvation achieved by Christ at the Cross and the consequent casting down of Satan and his evil hosts with finality (John 12:31-33; Col 2:15). The 1260-day time period found in Rev 12:6, which finds its obvious parallel in the "time, times, and half a time" of v. 14, points to the same time period found in Dan 7:25, as well as in Rev 11:3. The forty-two-month period of 11:2 and 13:5 are clearly the same period, indicated not only by the mathematic equivalency but also by the description of the events that take place during that period, a period during which the people of God are persecuted by the evil powers variously described as the blaspheming Little Horn or "king" that arises from Daniel's fourth beast (Dan 7:24-25), the nations who trample the holy city (Rev 11:2), the seven-headed Dragon/Serpent (Rev 12), and the blaspheming Beast from the sea (13:5). This long period, according to Daniel, reaches to the time of the end (Dan 7:17-18,21-22,25-27; cf. 8:17-25; 12:6-9). Therefore, Rev 12:17 should be seen as describing events which take place near the end of human history, since it is a sequel to the events of vv. 13-16. Thus, the vision of Rev 12 encompasses the essence of the entire struggle between good and evil since the beginning of the rebellion in heaven until the power of the Dragon and his heads is finally shattered at the eschaton, as revealed in the ensuing chapters.

The close connection between Rev 12 and 13 indicated by a repetition of similar events taking place in the same time period reveals that chap. 13 is a more detailed description of the events described in 12:6,13-17. After the failure of the Dragon/Serpent to destroy the Woman during this extended period of persecution, it turns its anger against the rest of the Woman's offspring, those who keep God's commandments and have the testimony of Jesus (12:17). In order to understand chap. 13 and the identity of the seven-headed, ten-horned Beast found there, it is imperative to read it in the light of chap. 12. A close comparison reveals that what is found in chap. 13 is the activity of the last two crowned heads of the Dragon of chap. 12, represented as two Beasts which do the work of the Dragon during the history of the Christian era.

The Seven-headed Beast of Rev 13

The first of the two Beasts of Rev 13 is the most important and the most enduring. It is depicted as rising up out of the sea. In this regard it reminds us of the four beasts of Dan 7. In Rev 17:15 the angelic interpreter tells John that waters symbolize peoples, multitudes, nations, and language groups. This suggests that the Beast of 13:1 is portrayed as arising from the same populated regions as Daniel's beasts. Indeed, the description and activities of the Beast are taken from the description of Daniel's fourth beast and its horns. But before we consider those features, we need to notice that this Beast is first described in terms very similar to the Dragon of chap. 12, for it is shown with seven heads and ten horns.

At the same time, however, it is distinguished from the Beast of chap. 12 in that it has, not seven crowns on its heads, but ten crowns on its ten horns. Wherever else we see these ten horns, whether in Dan 7 or Rev 17, the ten horns rule contemporaneously, not consecutively like the seven heads. This strongly suggests that they all appear together on one of the heads, just as they all appear together on Daniel's fourth beast. Since the language of Dan 7 is so strongly represented in the description of the Beast from the sea in Rev 13, as we shall see, it is reasonable to assume that it should be interpreted in the light of Dan 7. Therefore, the ten horns which rule during the period of this vision should probably be seen as the same ten horns depicted on the fourth beast of Dan 7. This suggests the time period of the Beast from the sea, which is confirmed by the fact that the time period during which the Little Horn, acting during the time of Daniel's fourth beast and its ten horns,² oppresses the saints in Dan 7:25, is the same period during which the Beast from the sea makes war against the saints in Rev 13:5,7, as shown above. The fourth beast in Dan 7 represents the Roman empire, as can be shown by a careful comparison with the other Danielic visions.³ Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that Rome is represented by the head on which the ten horns grow in Rev 13 as well. It is not reasonable to depict the ten horns, as in most artwork depicting the Beast from the sea, as growing from all seven heads, four heads with one horn each and three with two apiece. This confuses the interpretation, which should be first biblical, not imaginative. The ten horns all belong together in one period of history, namely during the period of the Roman empire and its decay into the nations of Europe that survive to the present day. Comparison with Dan 2 reveals that the legs of iron, represented by Rome, blend into the feet and toes of iron mixed with clay, which persist until they are destroyed and ground to powder by the stone kingdom of God (Dan 2:44).

Returning to Rev 13, we note that the Beast from the sea looks like the beasts of Dan 7, but cannot represent any of the first three beasts of Dan 7, since it has characteristics of all three of them. Like the fourth beast of Dan 7, it defies description, but is terrifying. It has the overall appearance (in body) of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion. Thus, it contains the destructive power of all of the first three of Daniel's beast powers, listed in reverse order. And on

²John ignores the detail of Daniel that three of the ten horns are subdued by the Little Horn at its rise. The ten horns are considered as a group, not individually.

³The visions of Dan 2,7,8, and 11 are parallel in some aspects, though they do not all begin at the same point. Dan 2 and 7 begin with the kingdom of Babylon, which was ruling the world at the time. Dan 8 and 11 begin with the kingdom of Medo-Persia, which was ruling at the time those visions were given. Dan 2:38 is explicit in this regard, as are also Dan 8:20-21 and Dan 11:1. The chronology of Dan 7 can easily be deduced by careful comparison with these more explicit visions. The four beasts, respectively, represent Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome (cf. Dan 7:17, 23). There can be little doubt in this regard.

each of its heads are written names which blaspheme God (Rev 13:1), a parallel with the characteristic activities of the Little Horn of Dan 7, which had a mouth speaking arrogant words and defying the Most High (Dan 7:8,11,20,25).⁴ Perhaps most significantly, the Dragon gave this Beast his own power and throne and great authority. So the Beast from the sea may *look like* the Dragon, but it is *not* the Dragon. Closer observation reveals that the Beast apparently represents one of the seven heads of the Dragon, specifically, the head with the ten horns which are shown to be crowned in this vision. The focus of this vision is a head which appears to have suffered a fatal wound (v. 3), yet whose fatal wound is healed. The Beast cannot be disconnected from its head, but is represented at a particular period of history by a head which has ten crowned horns.

As a result of the Beast's miraculous recovery from its seemingly fatal wound, everyone on earth whose name is not written in the Book of Life marvels and is led to regard the Beast with awe, even to the point of worship (vv. 3-4,8). In worshiping the Beast, the people of earth are indirectly worshiping the Dragon, whose power, throne, and authority are represented by the Beast (v. 4). They believe that the Beast's remarkable recovery is a sign of its superiority and omnipotence, and they are unwilling to compete with it (v. 4).

The various activities of the Beast from the sea are virtually all adapted from the description of the Little Horn in Dan 7 and 8:

1. It is allowed to speak great blasphemies against God (vv. 5,6; cf. Dan 7:8,11,20, 25).
2. It is given authority to do whatever it wants for forty-two months (v. 5; cf. Dan 7:25).
3. It slanders God's name, His sanctuary, and those who have their dwelling in heaven, namely, the saints and angels (v. 6; cf. Dan 8:10-12).
4. It is allowed to wage war against the saints and to overcome them (v. 7; cf. Dan 7:21,25; 8:24-25).
5. It is given authority to rule over every tribe, people, tongue, and nation (v. 7; cf. Dan 8:23-25).

Thus, by constant allusion to Dan 7 and 8, John aids the reader in identifying the power in view in Rev 13:1-8. It is no other than the Little Horn power of Dan 7,8, a power in open rebellion against God, against His sanctuary in heaven (Dan 8:10-12; Rev 13:6) in which the salvation of humanity is accomplished by our

⁴Blasphemy takes various forms in Scripture, generally, though not always, with relation to God: (1) it may imply derisive remarks, insults, or curses (Exod 22:28; 2 Kgs 19:22; Acts 6:11; 19:37; 2 Pet 2:12); (2) it may involve using someone's name in a demeaning or debasing way (Lev 24:11-16); (3) it may involve dishonoring someone's reputation by misrepresenting them (Isa 52:5; Ezek 20:27; Rom 2:24); (4) it may take the form of deliberate and defiant sinful acts (Num 15:30); (5) it may involve a claim to the prerogatives of God, such as the ability to forgive sins (Matt 9:3); or (6) it may take the form of a claim to be God or the Son of God (Matt 26:65; John 10:33,36).

heavenly High Priest (Heb 8:1-2; 9:23-24; Rev 5:6-10; 8:3-5; 11:19; 15:5; 16:17). and against those who worship God in His sanctuary by faith and thus have their dwelling in heaven (Heb 11:13-16; 12:22-24; 13:10,14). It was an outgrowth of the Roman empire, coming to power during the reign of the Ten Horns which arose in connection with the decay of the Roman empire, and it became dominant for a period of 1260 prophetic days, or literal years, following the time-honored prophetic principle of a year for each day (Num 14:34; cf. Ezek 4:5-6).⁵ After that, it would receive a seemingly fatal wound, but would recover and continue until the eschaton, becoming once again ever more powerful until the whole world would seem to be in its grip, worshiping it and believing in its superiority and omnipotence.

The Second Beast of Rev 13

Apparently somewhere around the time that the Beast from the sea receives its "fatal" wound, another Beast appears on the scene. This Beast comes not from the sea but from the earth. In that way it is unlike any of the other beasts in Scripture, all of which come from the sea. This distinction should not be taken lightly. If we understand this prophecy in the light of 12:13-17, there is a helpful interpretive clue. In 12:6,14 the Woman flees from the Dragon into the desert, where God protects her and sustains her. In 12:15 the Dragon/Serpent casts a great flood of water out of its mouth to drown the Woman in the desert, but the earth helps the Woman by opening its mouth and swallowing up the flood of water (v. 16). The flood of water, like the sea, represents great multitudes of people, or a large population. The earth, which swallows up the flood of water, is equated with a desert, or deserted area, a place with no significant population. At the time in history represented by the prophecy, this would equate with the opening up of the New World, where people who were persecuted in the Old World fled for protection. Out of this New World, according to 13:11 comes a new Beast, a Beast which at first offers a contrast with the Beast before it. Instead of having seven heads and ten horns, it has only two horns, like the horns of a lamb (v. 11). This simple, seemingly unpretentious power at first offers refuge to those escaping the persecution of the Beast from the sea, and the Woman escapes the attempts of the Dragon to destroy her in the Old World ruled by the Ten Horns and the Little

⁵This principle has been found useful in understanding the prophecy of Dan 9:24-27. for example, which points to the coming of the Messiah sixty-nine "weeks," or 483 days. "from the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem." The 483 years from the issuing of the decree in 457 B.C.E. to the baptism of Christ in 27 C.E. seems to be a clear fulfillment of this prophecy, lending credibility to the "year-for-a-day principle." It would have been on the basis of this principle that the time for the coming of the Messiah would have to have been understood beforehand.

Horn, or the Beast from the sea. In this way, John makes an advance over the book of Daniel, which does not introduce any New World power before the eschaton.

John, however, reveals how God uses the New World to foil the Dragon's attempts to destroy the Woman, and as a result, the Dragon becomes very angry and goes off to make special war against those who remain of her offspring (12:17). This shows that there is a renewed attempt by the Dragon late in history, after the 1260 years of persecution and the opening of the New World, to destroy by any possible means those who remain faithful to God. These are identified by two significant characteristics: they are those who (1) keep the commandments of God and (2) have the testimony of Jesus. The mention of keeping the commandments of God may be seen in a very general sense to point to an attitude of obedience and faithfulness to God. Yet, at the same time, the urgent message of the first angel of 14:6-7 may signal a more specific focus, namely, the worship of God as creator of heaven, earth, the sea, and the springs of water, a clear allusion to the fourth commandment of the Decalogue. Likewise, reference to having the testimony of Jesus may be understood in a very general sense as overcoming the Dragon by the word of their testimony (12:11). However, in the light of 19:10, which explicitly defines the testimony of Jesus as the spirit of prophecy, there may be an intentional pointer here to a restoration of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy, among the people of God at such a time.

Despite the fact that the Beast from the earth seems to be rather harmless in its initial phase, the text goes on to point out that it will nonetheless begin to speak as a dragon (13:11). In what way does it speak as a dragon? It exercises all the power of the first Beast (v. 12), the Beast from the sea, who exercised all the authority of the Dragon (v. 2). It does this by requiring all the earth to worship the first Beast, whose "fatal" wound had been healed (v. 12). This description reveals not only the politico-religious relationship of the two Beasts, but the time relationship between them. One is first, the other is second. The second begins to act in the same way as the first, but only after the "fatal" wound of the first has been healed. Both have political power, but exercise it in such a way as to control worship, and the worship is directed by the second to the first, though ultimately, in worshipping the first Beast, the Dragon is being worshiped. These Beasts are but the heads or earthly representatives of the Dragon, acting out his nefarious will. Their work is the work of the Dragon/Serpent, namely, to deceive the people of the world and thus to bring them to destruction (v. 14). Because Satan, the Dragon, is the great deceiver, the father of lies, and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44), his heads behave in the same way. The Beast from the earth uses miracles to deceive those who live on the earth (v. 13), and the people are impressed by these miracles, just as they were by the first Beast's miraculous recovery. The Beast then orders the people of earth to make an image, or likeness, of the first Beast, and it gives breath to the image, causing it to speak. Next, like Nebuchadnezzar, it commands all to worship the image, on pain of death. Additionally it requires everyone to receive a mark signifying loyalty to the Beast,

and no one may buy or sell unless they have the mark. This is another way of enforcing loyalty in violation of conscience, with effective socio-economic death for those unwilling to compromise their consciences.

It is not the purpose of this paper to attempt to provide historical identifications for each of the details of these prophecies, but to note the defining characteristics of each of these Beasts and the relationships between them. The promise to Daniel was that the wise will understand these things (Dan 12:10). Up to this point we have considered the Dragon of Rev 12 and the two Beasts of Rev 13. We see these three together in Rev 16:13 in such a way that we cannot confuse them, but we can see the relationship between them once again. There they are called the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet. There is no cause to be in doubt as to what the False Prophet represents, for it is described in 19:20 in such a way as not to be misunderstood. The False Prophet is there said to be the one who had performed the miraculous signs on behalf of the Beast, with which he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. This is a clear pointer to the Beast from the earth as described in 13:14. The False Prophet, therefore, is another name for the Beast from the earth. The Beast in 14:9,11; 15:2; 16:2,10,13; 19:19-20; and 20:4,10 is consistently the Beast from the sea, as the respective contexts indicate. These two unite with the Dragon himself in 16:13 to attempt to deceive the kings and nations of earth into gathering for a last great (spiritual) battle against God Almighty (v. 14). This battle is symbolically portrayed in 19:19-20, and the result is that the Beast and the False Prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (v. 20), a symbol for the second death (20:14; 21:8), that final end from which there is no recovery. The Dragon goes into the lake of fire at the end of the thousand years (20:10).

Now that we have drawn a fairly clear picture of the three main evil figures from Rev 12-13, we must turn to the scarlet Beast of Rev 17. How does this Beast relate to the other three? Is it one of the others or a different entity altogether? The solution is not a simple one, but the clues are there for a biblical answer, I believe.

The Seven-headed Beast of Rev 17

The Beast of Rev 17 first appears as a beast in 11:7: "Now when they [the Two Witnesses] have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them." To know who this Beast is, one must turn to 17:8, which describes the Beast there in similar terms: "The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction." There is only one Beast which goes into the Abyss in Revelation and comes out of it again. It is the Dragon, described in 20:2-3 as being bound in the Abyss for a thousand years, then being released for a little while before going into the lake of fire (v. 10). This Dragon/Beast is the same one seen in chap. 12, acting through his heads to accomplish his will on earth. In 11:7-

8 he takes an active role in the death of the Two Witnesses, his most powerful antagonists on earth. The Two Witnesses follow in the steps of their Lord, first prophesying, then being killed, their deaths celebrated, then being raised after three and a half days, and finally ascending to heaven in a cloud in the sight of their enemies. The Dragon loses again. That is the short answer. But we need to carefully assess the text of Rev 17 in full in order to provide a clear answer that meets all of the objections that arise.

We begin with a reminder that chap. 17 is an eschatological vision, which Rev 11 is not. In Rev 11, we expect a historical fulfillment between the first century and the eschaton. It is the heads of the Dragon/Beast that are acting on earth. This is not so in Rev 17. Thus, when the Beast is introduced in 17:3, we see that it still has seven heads and ten horns, but there are no crowns. This tells the reader that the historical kingdoms are not in authority. The essential character of the Beast, however, has not changed. It is covered with blasphemous names (v. 3). Its color is the same as that of the clothing of the Harlot who is sitting astride it, namely, scarlet, a color associated with harlotry in Josh 2:18,21 and Jer 4:30 and with sin in Isa 1:18. It is slightly different from the word for red (*puros*, fiery) used of the Dragon in 12:3; however, it is a difference only in hue, not in basic color. The significance of the Beast in chap. 17 is its relationship with the Harlot, who is the primary focus of chaps. 17-18. These two chapters are about the judgment of the Harlot (17:1). They are an explication of the judgment on Babylon under the seventh vial of 16:17-21, specifically v. 19. As such, the description of the Beast which the Harlot sits on is somewhat incidental to the purpose of the vision. Nonetheless, the relation between the two is significant enough to be given considerable attention in explaining the reason for the Harlot's judgment. The Harlot's name, Babylon, is called a "mystery" (17:7), which means that it requires an explanation to be clearly understood. So the attending angel provides John with the requisite explanation in terms that will be meaningful to him.

The complicating factor is that there are two time frames of reference in the angel's explanation. One is the time frame of the events being depicted in connection with the vision itself, which is eschatological time, the time of the Harlot's judgment, which takes place under the seventh vial, immediately prior to the Parousia. It also includes subsequent events, such as the Beast's ascent out of the Abyss and his going to perdition. The other time frame is John's own historical period, from which standpoint John is enabled to understand the prior historical aspect of the Beast in order to identify its heads and horns, which have a historical application, though that application is in the past from the perspective of the vision. Let us evaluate the text to see how these different time frames play out in the explanation.

The angel informs John in 17:8, "The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction." This explanation is from the perspective of the time frame of the vision, that is, eschatological. John had been told in v. 1, "Come, I will show you the punishment

of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters.” Then he was shown a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns. In vv. 7-18 the angel explains to him the mystery of the Woman and of the Beast in the setting in which he saw them. In that eschatological setting, the Beast is said to have had an active existence in the past, no active existence in the present, but a revival to an active existence in the future, when he comes up out of the Abyss until he goes to his destruction. This explanation, which seems to be in contrast to the Sovereign God who lives forever and ever, who never ceases to have an active existence (1:8; 4:8-9; 11:17), reveals two times when the Beast has no active existence: one at the judgment time to which the vision pertains, when the Beast goes into the Abyss, and another after the Beast comes out of the Abyss, when he goes to his destruction. The first is temporary, while the second is permanent. The first period during which the Beast was active was historical, when he operated on earth through his heads and horns to deceive and to destroy.⁶ The second period is eschatological, associated in 20:7-10 with a short period at the end of the thousand years during which the Beast is once again given freedom to deceive the nations and lead them in a last desperate effort to attempt to overthrow the place of God’s throne and of the inheritors of His kingdom. It becomes evident that the time of the vision is the eschatological period beginning with the judgment on Babylon under the seventh vial and continuing through the binding of Satan in the Abyss for one thousand years, ending with his release from the Abyss and his going to destruction in 20:10.

This relationship between the Beast and the Abyss confirms the initial conclusion that the Beast must be the Dragon, that Serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan (20:2). Just as with the Beast from the sea, to whom the Dragon gave his power, his throne, and great authority, and who received a seemingly fatal wound from which it recovered, the (resurrected)⁷ wicked are amazed by the seemingly miraculous return to activity of this scarlet Beast after a thousand years of being bound in the Abyss, unable to be active in any way (17:8). It is like a return from the dead.

⁶In 9:1 John is shown a star that had fallen from heaven to earth, and the latter was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. In v. 2 he opens the shaft and releases a numberless horde of destroying agents depicted as a swarm of devouring locusts which darken the sky with their numbers like the smoke from a huge furnace. In v. 11 this “king” of the destroying horde is called the angel of the Abyss, and his name is Abaddon and Apollyon—the destroyer. The star that had fallen from heaven is a destroying angel who at that point has charge of the destructive powers of the Abyss. Later, in 20:1-3, he is bound in his own headquarters by another angel from heaven with his own key to the Abyss. During that time his powers to deceive and destroy are rendered inactive.

⁷The wicked are all slain at the Parousia (19:21), but are resurrected at the end of the thousand years (20:5, 13), at which time Satan gathers them together for a final battle to take the city of God (20:8).

Having thus identified the Beast at the time of the vision, the angel shifts gears in v. 9 to identify the heads and horns of the Beast, a reference to its past activities in historical time. This explanation is given to John with reference to his own historical time frame. The angel says, "This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while" (vv. 9-10 RSV). We notice first that the shift in time frames is marked by a call for a mind with wisdom. One needs to be alert, to pay close attention, and to let the Holy Spirit guide the mind with wisdom from above. The reader should recall the promise to Daniel that the wise will be enabled to understand in the time of the end (Dan 12:9-10). Next we notice that two different, albeit not incongruous, explanations are given for the seven heads. First they are described as seven mountains,⁸ then as seven kings. The former is another symbol, which can represent a kingdom in Scripture (Jer 50:25-26; cf. Rev 8:8), while the latter is a literal interpretation. Because the angel wants to depict the Woman as sitting, he first uses the symbol of a mountain rather than the literal interpretation of a king to describe this in a meaningful way. Yet ultimately, the seven heads represent seven kings, or kingdoms. In this same connection, we note, significantly, that the Harlot is depicted as sitting on the heads of the Beast, not on the Beast itself. This is confirmed in the interpretation given in vv. 1, 15, and 19, which inform us that the Harlot sits upon many waters, which represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and language groups, and that she is the Great City that rules over the kings of the earth. The Harlot is primarily a historical figure, which is judged and destroyed immediately before the Parousia. She sits on, or rules over, the kings, nations, and peoples of the earth, not over Satan, the Dragon/Beast himself.

The angel goes on to explain, from John's historical perspective, that five of these kings or kingdoms have fallen, one is presently active, and one remains to appear in the future. He further informs John that when the last kingdom appears it will last for only a relatively short duration. It was not difficult, therefore, for John to place himself historically in the prophecy with respect to the seven heads of the Beast. He was living during the dominion of the sixth head. Five were already past history to him. Only one still lay in the future. If the Roman empire was the sixth head, what were the five that preceded it? Daniel only portrays three world powers before Rome, namely, in reverse order, Greece, Medo-Persia, and Babylon. But Daniel was already late in the history of God's people. Two other

⁸The Greek word is *orē*, mountains, not hills, as in some versions, which would be *bounoi* (cf. Luke 23:30). The translation "hills" is based on a presupposition that there is meant to be an allusion to Rome, sometimes referred to in ancient literature as the "City of Seven Hills." However, in a search I conducted in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, the word *orē* did not appear in any of the ancient references to the seven hills of Rome.

significant world powers meeting the same criteria had preceded him. Bible historians have had little difficulty in identifying these. Using the biblical criteria for the behavior and characteristics of the other heads of the Beast, Assyria and Egypt, respectively, in reverse order, seem to fit the criteria.⁹

If, then, the first six heads of the Beast represent, respectively, Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, what must the seventh head represent? It should be another world power that does the same work as the powers which precede it, and it should appear elsewhere in the prophecies of Revelation, with additional information given about it that would help the reader to identify it as another head of the Beast. It must also meet the criteria given by the interpreting angel to John, namely, that it had not yet appeared, but when it would appear it must remain for a short time (*oligon auton dei meinai*).¹⁰ The priority of *oligon* in this Greek phrase shows that the emphasis is not on "must remain," as some would have it, but on "for a short time," or "for a brief period." In other words, the seventh head would only appear at a very late point in earthly history, since it is the last of the seven heads and it continues for only a relatively brief period. Compared with the sixth head, Rome, which began to rule in the first century B.C.E., was ruling at the time John had his vision, and, including the Ten Horns on its head, would continue ruling after receiving the "fatal" wound, and being healed therefrom, will continue to rule until the eschaton, the seventh head would rule for a very brief period. What other world power could meet these criteria?

The sixth head of the Beast, representing Rome, appeared in Rev 12 as well as in Rev 13. In Rev 12, the Dragon was acting through its Roman head to attempt to destroy the Manchild as soon as it was born, then continued to persecute the Woman after failing to destroy the Manchild. The earth helped the Woman by opening its mouth to swallow up the flood of water that the Dragon/Serpent spewed out to overwhelm her. We have seen that this represented, at least in part, the opening of the lands of the New World to permit the Woman to escape the religious persecution threatening to overwhelm her in the Old World. In Rev 13, the Beast from the sea represents the Little Horn power of Dan 7 which arises from among the Ten Horns on the fourth beast, which represents Rome. After it

⁹The description of these powers from Daniel and the Revelation suggest the following criteria: (1) they are dominant world powers; (2) they oppressed, enslaved, or took captive the people of God in a formal way, using civil power to accomplish their oppression, and they killed or attempted to kill leaders of God's people; (3) they manifested a contempt for the God of heaven and for His worship and enforced or attempted to enforce alternative forms of worship upon the people of God.

¹⁰There has been some controversy over what *oligon* means here, but it is imperative to remember that *oligon* here must be understood in the context of *auton dei meinai*, which is a clear reference to the time during which the seventh head must remain or continue, namely, a short or brief time.

receives its "fatal" wound and recovers, another Beast arises from the earth and ends up enforcing the worship of the first Beast. It seems only reasonable to assume that this Beast, which is a world power which does the same work as the Beast before it, which is the work of the Dragon, is the seventh head of the Beast of Rev 17. This power appears late in earth's history and begins to speak like the Dragon after the healing of the "fatal" wound of the Beast from the sea. It acts in this way only during a brief, final period of earth's history, making an image to the first Beast and causing all who will not worship the first Beast and its image to be killed. These events have not yet taken place, but the Revelation to John predicts the certainty of these events before the end and points to the earthly powers that will accomplish them. Lest any reader fails to take the warnings seriously, the third angel of Rev 14:9-12 makes a last, desperate appeal to avoid the impending judgments to be executed against those who worship the Beast and its image and who receive its mark.

The vision of Rev 17, however, is not primarily about the seven heads of the Beast. They are somewhat incidental to the activities of the Beast itself and to the Harlot which sits astride the heads. The vision is primarily about the judgment of the Harlot, yet the Harlot is in collusion with the Beast and rules over its heads. The interpreting angel goes on to tell John, "The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction" (17:11). The word "king" which appears here in the NIV is not found in the Greek, but it is implied by the masculine form of "eighth." It cannot refer to an eighth head, since the word for "head" is feminine. This eighth king, the angel says, belongs to the seven kings; that is, he is the eighth in the consecutive line of the seven kings as opposed to the ten kings which rule contemporaneously as the Ten Horns. There are only seven historical kings or world powers that are represented as the heads of the Beast, but when their historical rule is ended, in the eschatological period the Beast asserts himself to rule as an eighth king, to lead the final assault against the throne of God and the Lamb. This final assault is portrayed in the subsequent verses.

In 17:12-14 the angel tells John, "The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." The fact that the Ten Horns have not yet received a kingdom when the angel is interpreting the vision to John shows that they come at some point after the beginning of the rule of the sixth head, which was already ruling at the time of John, according to v. 10. Both the Ten Horns and the seventh head lie in the future with reference to John, though the precise time of their rise is not indicated. What is evident is that both the Ten Horns and the seventh head continue until the eschaton. If the Beast from the sea and the Beast from the earth are the sixth and seventh heads of the Beast, respectively, as argued

above, both the sixth and seventh heads continue until the eschaton, one in the Old World and the other in the New World. Judging from the allusions to Dan 7, the Ten Horns appear to arise from the sixth head, Rome, and they also continue until the eschaton, just as the feet and toes in Dan 2 continue until the coming of the stone kingdom.

In Rev 17:12 the Ten Horns receive authority as kings for one hour with the Beast. This is now a description of what takes place at the eschatological time of the vision, when the Beast is functioning as an eighth king. It says nothing about when the Ten Horns began to rule historically. That was defined in 13:1-8, when the Ten Horns appear with crowns. Verse 13 points out that the Ten Horns “have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast.” This means that in the eschatological period they surrender their authority to rule to the Beast and submit to his authority for a particular purpose. That purpose is indicated in v. 14: “They will make war against the Lamb.” The Beast, who is the Dragon, has always been the leader in the war against the Lamb. He has worked historically through his heads and horns to make war against the followers of the Lamb, but now he personally assumes the leadership in the eschatological period, and the Ten Horns, representing the civil powers of earth at the end of history, surrender their power and authority to his leadership in the final battle against God and the Lamb.

This final battle is the eschatological battle called “the battle on the great day of God Almighty” in 16:14. The Dragon, the Beast (from the sea), and the False Prophet, are depicted in 16:13-14 as having evil spirits coming out of their mouths, which “are the spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.” The Ten Horns represent “the kings of the whole world,” who join with the Dragon and his sixth and seventh heads in the final war against God and the Lamb. This is a spiritual battle, not a military one. Its goal is to overthrow the kingdom of God. This is the last desperate battle in the war that began in heaven and was brought to this earth. The issues in this war are described in Isa 14:12-15:

How you have fallen from heaven,
 O morning star, son of the dawn!
 You have been cast down to the earth,
 you who once laid low the nations!
 You said in your heart,
 “I will ascend to heaven;
 I will raise my throne
 above the stars of God;
 I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,¹¹

¹¹“The mount of assembly,” also called here “the sacred mountain,” is the place of God’s throne, which Satan coveted for himself. In the Hebrew it is *har-mô`ed*, which some scholars have seen as perhaps the best solution to the vexing problem of transliterating and interpreting *Harmageddōn* in Rev 16:16, since the text points to a place name found in the

on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High."
 But you are brought down to the grave,
 to the depths of the pit.

The battle to culminate this war does not actually take place under the sixth vial, which is merely a preparation for the battle by gathering the forces of earth together, but it happens under the seventh vial, which depicts the collapse of Babylon and of the cities of the nations. Rev 17-18 is an extended delineation of this final battle, as noted above, depicted as the judgment of the great Harlot. It is natural, therefore, to find this battle portrayed in 17:14 as the final act that leads to the judgment of the Harlot by fire.

The final battle in this war is further described in 19:19: "Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army." The Rider on the white horse is none other than Jesus Christ, the Lamb, as indicated by his titles, including "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (19:16), which is parallel to that of the Lamb in 17:14: "He is Lord of lords and King of kings."

As indicated in 17:14, there is no serious contest in this final battle, for "the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." This is the same picture portrayed in 19:20-21: "But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. . . . The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."

The judgment of the great Harlot is not forgotten in all of this. Rev 17:16-17 tells the story: "The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled." The purposes of the Beast and of the Ten Kings are overruled by the purposes of God, and they become the tools in God's hands to accomplish the destruction of the Harlot, who had ruled as a despot over the kings of the earth (v. 18). As always, sin works the destruction of those who engage in it.

Hebrew, that is, in the Hebrew scriptures. See, e.g., Meredith G. Kline, "Har Magedon: The End of the Millennium," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (1996): 207-10; C. C. Torrey, "Armageddon," *Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938): 237-48. The theological significance is remarkable, and the significance of gathering to a place called "the mount of assembly" is also notable.

Conclusion

This overview of the scarlet Beast of Rev 17 and its backgrounds in the book, has attempted to demonstrate that the scarlet Beast with the seven heads and ten horns is none other than the Dragon of chap. 12, who began his rebellion in heaven and, when he was cast out into the earth with his angels, continued that rebellion against God and the Lamb through his heads and horns, which represent the dominant ruling powers of earth. These world powers have cooperated with the Dragon to accomplish his work of deceiving the people of earth into joining the rebellion against heaven and against those who ally themselves with God and the Lamb. Nonetheless, God and the Lamb, with their faithful followers, will prevail in the end, and the Dragon and his followers will be destroyed. The issues at stake in this great controversy revolve around loyalty and worship. Those who believe that God is faithful and just, that His laws are reasonable and immutable, will worship and obey Him faithfully, despite threats and intimidation, even to death.