

The Navarre Bible

BOOK OF REVELATION (Chapter 13)

Texts and Commentaries by members of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre

CHAPTER 13:1-18

THE BEASTS GIVEN AUTHORITY BY THE DRAGON

- 1) And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads.
- 2) 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.
- 3) One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder.
- 4) Men worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and who can fight against it?"
- 5) And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months;
- 6) It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.
- 7) Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.(f) And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation,
- 8) And all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.
- 9) If any one has an ear, let him hear:
- 10) If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.
- 11) Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon.
- 12) It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.
- 13) It works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men;
- 14) and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived;
- 15) And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.
- 16) Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand of or the forehead,
- 17) So that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.
- 18) This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six.(g)

**Commentary from the
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NAVARRE**

Verses 1-18: Satan, the ancient serpent, launches his attack via the beasts, whom he endows with his power (cf. vv.2, 12). The beasts stand for those who in the course of history have embodied the powers of

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evil in one way or another. The first beast (vv. 1-10) **symbolizes political power** taken to such an extreme that it supplants God; the second (vv. 11-12), those forces of evil who defend, justify and propagate that deification of power by giving it an acceptable face. These beasts are, first, a reference to the Roman empire, but that empire is seen in turn as being the **tool of a diabolical power** which forever hovers over mankind and will become more virulent as the End approaches.

In his war against the woman's children, the devil in addition to himself attacking them one by one also avails of socio-political and cultural factors which usurp the position of the one true God: "Unfortunately, the resistance to the Holy Spirit which St. Paul emphasizes in the **interior and subjective dimension** as tension, struggle and rebellion taking place in the human heart finds in every period and especially in the modern era its **external dimensions**, which takes concrete form as the content of culture and civilization, as a **philosophical system, an ideology, a programme** for action and for the shaping of human behavior. It reaches its clearest expression in **materialism**, both in its theoretical form—as a system of thought—and in its practical form—as a method of interpreting and evaluation facts, and likewise as a programme of corresponding conduct. The system which has developed most and carried to its extreme practical consequences this form of thought, ideology and praxis is dialectical and historical materialism, which is still recognized as the **essential core of Marxism**" (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 56).

Versus 1-4: In his description of the first beast St. John employs symbols used by the prophet Daniel to describe the various empires which overran Israel, particularly the successors of Alexander the Great (notably Antiochus Epiphanes); they are symbolized in the fourth beast of the prophet's vision (cf. Dan 7:7-8). In Jewish and Christian circles at the time when the Apocalypse was written, the fourth beast in the Book of Daniel was already being reinterpreted as the Roman empire; and the author of the Book of Revelation himself does this more explicitly when he says later that the seven heads and ten horns are so many other emperors and kings (cf. Rev 17:9-12).

The wound on one of the heads may be a reference to some particular political crisis, like the assassination of Julius Caesar or the disturbances which followed the death of Nero and in the event came to nothing. The majority of the Fathers see the **beast as representing antichrist**; St. Irenaeus, for example, writes: "The beast that rises up is the epitome of evil and falsehood, so that the full force of apostasy which it embodies can be cast into the fiery furnace" (*Against Heresies*, 5, 29).

In any event, the sacred text is **denouncing the sin of idolizing political authority**, as if it had divine attributes. The exclamation "Who is like the beast?" is a kind of rejoinder to the meaning of the Archangel Michael's name, "Who like God?" It makes sense, then, that the description of the head of the beast is the same as that of the serpent (cf. 12:3), showing they are undoubtedly connected with one another. "Idolatry is an extreme form of disorder produced by sin. The replacement of adoration of the living God by worship of created things falsifies the relationships between individuals and brings with it various kinds of oppression" (SCDF, *Libertatis Conscientia*, 39).

Versus 5-8: The beast's blasphemous language and acts of violence show that his power derives from Satan. He is active throughout the course of history—forty-two months or three and a half years—and is present the world over. Only those who by the grace of God acknowledge and follow Christ can avoid worshipping

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the beast, that is, can resist political absolutism which has no place for God or his law.

Christian faith is the great guarantor of true freedom: “The reality of the depth of freedom has always been known to the Church, above all through the lives of a multitude of the faithful, especially among the little ones and the poor. In their faith, these latter know that they are the object of God’s infinite love. Each of them can say: ‘I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20b). Such is the dignity which none of the powerful can take away from them: such is the liberating joy present in them” (SCFD, *Libertatis Conscientia*, 21). And so it is that the Church, in the socio-political context, is “the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 76).

Versus 9-10: Here, in an aside, St. John addresses the reader directly, inviting him to recognize the contemporary truth of what he is revealing at God’s command. The people to whom the book was originally addressed could see for themselves what happened when Satan’s power was unleashed against the Church (it was the time of Domitian’s persecution: A.D. 95-96). However, his invitation is addressed to everyone who reads the book, irrespective of what period of history they live in. We well know that “our age has seen the birth of **totalitarian systems and forms of tyranny** which would not have been possible in the time before the technological leap forward. On the one hand, technical expertise has been applied to acts of genocide. On the other, various minorities try to hold in thrall whole nations by the **practice of terrorism**. Today control can penetrate into the innermost life of individuals, and even the forms of dependence created by early-warning systems can represent potential threats of oppression” (SCDF, *Libertatis Conscientia*, 14).

The Book of Revelation, using the words which Jeremiah addressed to evildoers (cf. Jer 15:2, 43:11), applies them to the last times. St. John thereby exhorts Christians to stiffen their resistance despite what persecution brings—to call on their resources of faith. “Suffering”, says John Paul II commenting on Romans 5:3, “as it were contains a special *call to the virtue* which man must exercise on his own part. And this is the virtue of perseverance in bearing whatever disturbs and causes harm. In doing this, the individual unleashes hope, which maintains in him the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being” (*Salvific doloris*, 23).

Versus 11-17: Further on (cf. 16:13; 19:20 and notes), this second beast is identified with the **FALSE PROPHET** because his role consists in leading men astray, getting them to worship the first beast. Because he has real (but evil) power he is able to work wonders similar to those performed by the prophets (for example, Elijah, who brought fire down from heaven: cf. 1 Kings 18:38) and can even seem to vie with the power of the life-giving Spirit by breathing life into the images of the beast. He is despotic in the extreme, depriving people of subsistence unless they submit to him and bear his mark. “The beast that rises from the earth stands for pride in earthly glory; and the fact that it has two horns like a lamb means that its hypocritical sanctity makes it appear to have wisdom, whereas only the Lord has true wisdom” (St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia*, 33, 20).

We do not know if the author is referring to a specific individual (such as the Asiarch who was charged with the fostering of emperor worship in Asia Minor) or a group (such as the pagan priests who exercised and propagated that cult). There is little doubt but that this beast is introduced in order to draw attention to the **political-religious implications** of emperor worship and its consequences for Christians. Basically the beast is

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a symbol for regimes which reject God and put man on a pedestal. Nowadays emperor worship is seldom a problem but **militant atheism** has been a modern parallel whether in the **form of atheistic secularism or of dialectic materialism**. St. Hippolytus describes the mark and seal of the beast in these words: "I reject the Creator of heaven and earth; I reject Baptism; I refuse to worship God. To you [Beast] I adhere; in you I believe" (*De consummate.*).

Materialism works in the same deceptive way as the beast does, for although "it sometimes also speaks of the 'spirit' and of 'questions of the spirit', as for example in the fields of culture or morality, it does so only insofar as it considers certain facts as derived from matter (*epiphenomena*), since according to this system matter is the one and only form of being. It follows, according to this interpretation, that religion can only be understood as a kind of 'idealistic illusion', to be fought with the most suitable means and methods according to circumstances of time and place, in order to eliminate it from society and from man's very heart" (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 56).

Verse 18: The author of the Apocalypse here uses a method (called *gematria* in Greek) to reveal the name of the beast in a numerical form. In both Hebrew and Latin letters of the alphabet were also used as numbers. The figure 666 fits with the name Caesar Nero in Hebrew. Some manuscripts gave the number as 616, which fits Caesar Nero in Greek. However, Tradition does not provide an exact interpretation and various other names have in fact been suggested.

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If you have a Bible Study Prayer Group, this is an excellent source to read, study and share with others in order of preparing for the second coming of Jesus Christ, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again."