

20

REVELATION 13

CHRIST EXPOSES THE DECEPTIVE NATURE OF EVIL

Have you ever heard the word “hexakosioihexekontahexaphobia”? It means “fear of 666”. This number, which we find at the end of Revelation 13, is probably the most well-known and most often quoted number in the whole Bible.

It has taken on a life of its own as an occult symbol for dark, evil, spiritual powers. Just saying the number sends shivers up the spines of many people. Some have refused to accept phone numbers, license plates or credit cards with 666 on them. Once a high school student somewhere in the US refused to run in an athletic race, because she was assigned the number 666. In 2003 the US Interstate 666 was renamed by the Highway Department, because people called it the “Devil’s Highway”. Some were convinced that it was cursed, so that on that Highway more accidents would happen than anywhere else. On the other hand, Satan-worshippers kept stealing the highway signs.

But what does 666 actually stand for in the context of Rev.13? And what is the relationship with the beast that we see here? Many have tried to explain this with the help of gematria. “Gematria” is an ancient system to assign numbers to the letters of the alphabet, or even to a word or a phrase.

However, the wish to find a specific solution triggers many wild speculations as to what or who the number 666 stands for. Many see it as the key that unlocks the identity of the antichrist. This has led to a bizarre variety of options, depending on the imagination of the one who is decoding the number. 666 has been said to refer to the Roman emperor Nero, or the Pope, Hitler, several American presidents, and others.

But what is lacking in all these explanations are the *wisdom* and *understanding* needed, according to v.18, to see the comfort in this number. We will come back to this when we have seen the full picture of John's vision in Revelation 13.

E VIL'S APPEARANCE

It might be good to refresh our memory as to where we are in the main structure of the Book of Revelation. After the introductory chapters, the Lamb of God received the scroll of redemptive history, sealed with seven seals (Rev. 4 and 5).

He opened the seals one by one, and then we found in Rev. 8 that the seventh seal initiated a new series of seven, the seven trumpet blasts. Then, in Rev. 11 we heard the sound of the seventh trumpet. This one announces seven bowls with the seven last plagues of God's wrath. After this, John's visions will lead us straight into God's final judgment.

But before all this unfolds in Rev. 15 and the following chapters, there is again an interruption in the sequence, an interruption that the glorified Christ uses to warn us, but also to comfort and encourage us. That is in Rev. 12–14. Here we find ourselves right in the middle of that section.

In a way you can say that Rev. 13 gives us an important clue that helps us to see how Revelation unlocks the history of our world. It gives the view from above that shows us how the Almighty God is dealing with the powers of sin and evil in this world.

When Satan is thrown out of heaven, and hurled down to the earth, the conflicts in this world intensify. That was Rev. 12. Then the vision continues.

We see this raving mad dragon standing on the beach, the place where land and sea meet. That does not promise any good. Remember Rev. 12:12 – *Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short.*

This is his mind-set when he goes off to do what it says in 12:17, to *make war on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus*, the believers. To that end, Satan now summons his agents, his evil accomplices to assist him in his attack on God’s people, God’s church, on you and me.

John tells us that he sees two beasts, two symbolic animals. He sees one rising out of the sea (v.1), the other one rising out of the earth (v.11). They look quite different, but that is deceptive. In reality they form an evil coalition, like earth and sea belong together. And together they attempt to master the whole world.

It is pretty frightening what John sees slowly emerging from the water, a bizarre but fierce monster with repulsive features. It comes *out of the sea*. In Revelation “sea” is symbolic for the realm of chaos and hostility. That is why it says in Rev. 21:1 that the “new heaven and the new earth” will have *no longer any sea*. Then the proper order will be restored, no more chaos. Here the fact that this monstrous creature arises from the sea shows its intention to throw this world into chaos and disorder.

John describes in detail what this beast looks like. It is remarkably similar to the dragon (Rev.12:3). With *ten horns and seven heads* it has all the terrible features of Satan, the devil, God’s fiercest enemy. “Horns” are symbols of power to destroy, and “heads” refer to ruling authority.

In other words, whatever this beast does, it operates in this world with a power and authority driven by Satan. This is reinforced by two other things.

The first is that it has diadems, or crowns, on its ten horns. These are signs of royal authority. In Revelation only three characters are wearing those: Satan (Rev. 12:3), this beast, and Christ (Rev. 19:12). But Christ has numerous crowns, while the evil characters have only a few. That is good to know!

The other detail that shows his malicious intentions, is that on each of its seven heads it has, very prominently and visibly, *a blasphemous name*. Now

in the Bible your name expresses who you are, it tells something significant about you. In other words, while this ferocious monster claims divine authority, it defies at the same time the one true, living God. Its purpose is to oppose God and take his place as ruler of the world.

In a sense this beast, with its claim of being qualified to rule this world with divine power and authority, is a caricature of Christ.

Now, how and where do we see this beast show up in our world today?

Here again, what we read in the Old Testament can help us. In the book of the prophet Daniel we read that Daniel sees a vision of four scary beasts (Daniel 7). It is then explained to him that these represent four kingdoms, four hostile political powers that threaten God's people. When you compare the descriptions, this horrific monster that John is seeing, combines many of the frightening aspects of the animals in Daniel's vision into one (v.2).

That means that this beast out of the sea represents all the evil political powers in this world that turn against God, against Christ and his church throughout our history. It exposes those antichristian powers as inspired by Satan.

John's first readers would have recognized this in the hostile Roman Empire and its rulers. But we should not restrict it to that. We can expect the same anywhere and anytime between Jesus' ascension and his return.

When political power, the power of the state, becomes antichristian in its values, and it wants to force these values on all its citizens, it always turns into a cruel monster, ready to devour God's children. When human power and authority in this world demand absolute loyalty and obedience, the consequences are terrifying. For then the goal becomes to resist God's authority, destroy his work, and annihilate his people.

In the appearance of this beast you can already see that it is inspired by the power of the dragon, Satan himself, the source of all evil. And the impression that this power is invincible, is reinforced by a remarkable observation (v.3): one of the seven heads was fatally wounded. That is a serious blow to the power of this monster, or so it seems! However, here is the surprise, the mortal wound miraculously healed.

Think of the symbolism. There are times that antichristian political powers are weak and do not have much influence. Those are times of relief for the church, freedom for the gospel of Jesus. But a little later the hostile oppression will raise its ugly head again. This astonishing healing miracle tells us that this beast is just too powerful. The powers that hate God and the church will not die.

This powerful position of the first beast, and so the influence of Satan, is promoted by the second beast. And it makes clever use of this impressive healing-miracle to do so (see v.12 and 14). However, you would not expect this agenda when you only pay attention to what this second beast looks like.

John tells us that he sees this other beast come *out of the earth*. Here the word “earth” represents the human world, the breeding ground of what is sinful, evil. But this animal looks quite different. As a matter of fact, it is not frightening at all, it has only one head, no crowns, and just two horns. It has the innocent, harmless, non-threatening and trustworthy appearance of a lamb.

But that is deceiving! As soon as this beast opens its mouth, we find that out. When it starts talking, it shows its destructive evil nature, its true malicious character. *It spoke like a dragon*, says John. Here we have another henchman of the Devil, ready to promote evil and hatred towards the Holy God and his church.

This innocent appearance comes as a warning. When you want to distinguish good from evil, do not be fooled by your first impression of what you see. Do not just think to yourself, “it looks good. This person is decent, friendly, and harmless and his message seems pretty reliable. I can trust him.”

No, take time to listen carefully. What you hear him say may sound alright, but is it according to God’s Word, the Bible, the true gospel?

That is why this second beast is also known later on as *the false prophet*. That is in Rev. 16:13, 19:20, and 20:10. The Bible often warns against false prophets. They look innocent. They present themselves as faithful and trustworthy messengers from God. But they are not. Their words are lies dressed

up as truth. And their goal is to mislead people. In Matthew 7:15 Jesus says: *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

Here too, it says in v.14 that *he deceives those who dwell on earth*. In a sense this second beast is a caricature of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit makes you believe in Jesus Christ, so this beast wants to snatch you out of God's hand and make you worship the powerful beast from the sea. His job is to convince folks that it is beneficial and worthwhile to be loyal to beast number one.

Just as any dictatorial government in this world, so also Satan employs a ministry of propaganda. Here the appearance of beast number two suggests that he acts on God's behalf. But in reality he is Satan's Public Relations Chief, in support of the first beast.

And he has impressive and persuasive means to work with. We read that he *performs great signs*. He tries to mimic the two prophetic witnesses we met in Rev. 11, to the point that he even *makes fire come down from heaven to earth*. In that sense he is the evil counterpart of the great prophet Elijah (see 2 Kings 1). But it is all meant to deceive people. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9 Paul warns us against *the activity of Satan* which comes with *all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception*. He talks about *a strong delusion*.

This beast out of the earth represents the spiritual, philosophical, cultural and religious structures in our society. Yes, also 'religious' because he does preach worship. Although it is not the worship of the One True God. He promotes a worldview that supports and validates the antichristian political powers in the world.

It is a frightening picture, these two evil buddies that seem to run the world together, driven by Satan himself. The first is a horrific monster. But the second, although it looks harmless, turns out to be just as dangerous as the first one.

The first is Satan's hand or fist, the second is Satan's mind.

E VIL'S INFLUENCE

John's vision also shows us how effective these devilish powers co-operate with each other in our world. The influence of the evil they represent is just incredibly powerful. We read that *men worship the beast from the sea*. It is the amazing healing and survival of this monster that leaves the whole world astonished, totally mesmerized, filled with awe and ready to follow, without critical questions.

How impressed people are, shows in the rhetorical questions they ask (v.4). Think of some of the exclamations in the Old Testament. For instance, in Exodus 15:11 we hear: *Who is like you, O LORD?* The answer is obvious: "Of course no one is."

Here people exclaim: *Who is like the beast? Who can fight against it?* The obvious answer without any doubt is again: "No one is. That's just impossible." For those followers, this beast takes the place of Almighty God.

It is all around us. So many people believe that you do not need God. Our human political or economic powers are invincible. They want to run our lives in everything. They will save the world. Their claim to be like God is pretty persuasive. *Who is like the beast?* But in John's vision the exalted Christ shows us the true nature and the worldwide impact of this evil influence.

With its arrogant and blasphemous language, the beast will have the upper hand for forty-two months. This represents the whole time until Jesus' return. Blaspheming and slandering the Holy God is what he likes to do, slandering and ridiculing God's children here and in heaven is his favourite activity. God? That's ridiculous, there is no God! To think he is ruling this world and our society according to his will and work? Nonsense.

And these evil political powers are so successful in waging war against the believers, that Satan's authority and influence reaches every corner of the earth, *every tribe, people, language and nation* (v.7). The whole world is under his spell.

Or almost! There are also some *from every tribe, people, language, and nation* who refuse to worship the beast, purchased by the blood of the Lamb (v.8).

The symbolism of this beast also includes more subtle ways to influence people. In democratic countries, like ours, political powers do not demand literal worship. But we are told to look at the power of 'the State', not only to fix economic and social problems, but also as the source of moral and spiritual values. You better believe the government's claim that 'the State' knows what is good for you and for your kids.

And if you do not, you are socially unfit. But don't worry, the state has the means to make sure that you will behave like a good and well-adjusted citizen in our secular society. Things like public education, financial regulations, human rights tribunals and required sensitivity training for those who challenge politically correct views.

As Christians we may not feel the immediate threat of death in such countries but if you do not accept the godless values and assumptions of this pagan society, you can feel distrusted and not accepted.

This pressure through political power and government programs is reinforced by the influence of ideological, spiritual or philosophical evil in this world. This is symbolized by the second beast. Prompted by Satan's hatred for God, he cleverly uses his many tricks and pseudo-miracles, his *great signs*, to deceive people.

As a false prophet he ignores both the reality of sin, and salvation by grace through Jesus. He makes false promises about a world without war, hunger and poverty if we would only believe his ideas and trust him. He makes people walk away from God, from Jesus Christ, and his church. He deceives them into thinking that falsehood is truth, and that they should worship the creation instead of the Creator.

His deceit affects people's mindset and thinking. He gets them excited about new ideas and a different worldview. His arguments seem convincing enough. In the Bible we read about signs and miracles to strengthen faith in God. Think of Elijah's fire from heaven, and of the signs the Apostles performed in the New Testament.

“Well”, says this false prophet, “look at me. I can do the same. Forget about God.”

“And guess what – I can do even more!” The Old Testament sometimes ridicules and pokes fun at idols (Deuteronomy 4:28; Psalm 115:4-8; Psalm 135:15-18; Isaiah 44:9-17). These dumb images cannot see, hear, or speak.

“Watch me,” says the false prophet, “If you make an image of the first beast, I can make it talk” (v.15). This is totally amazing.

All these astonishing things fascinate and impress people. They convince them that the spiritual and philosophical ideas of the false prophet must be correct. He makes it so obvious that life makes more sense without faith in God and without faith in Jesus Christ. And if you do not agree and you do not share such a worldview, they think you are stupid, backward, and out of touch with reality. You do not get it.

Consider the use of mass media and social media. Yes, they can be used to reach more people with the gospel of Jesus Christ than ever before and that is a blessing.

But in today’s society, communication via these means and through educational institutions have also become Satan’s most powerful tool to teach us the secular views of ourselves and the world we live in. A materialistic worldview considers God absent, irrelevant or non-existent. Money, health, intelligence, beauty and sexual pleasure – those are the things that give us the good life.

And this lie is so pervasive, that all this seems obvious, natural, and inevitable. Think of it. How can these ideas be wrong, when the miracles of science and technology show us how superior our modern views are? Our society has come a long way since the Dark Ages, and without God.

With missionary zeal the modern militant atheists are trying to rid the world of religion. In 2013 a philosophy professor wrote a book, called *A Manual for Creating Atheists*.¹⁰ It is meant as a guide for talking people out of their faith. And if you argue with this and you ask critical questions, you are just ignorant. You don’t think. You are not ‘with it’.

¹⁰ Peter Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, Pitchstone Publishing, 2013

The advance of these evil influences seems unstoppable. The beast from the earth seems firmly in control. It says that it *causes all... to be marked on the right hand or the forehead*, as a way to identify that person as belonging to the beast from the sea.

This word 'mark' occurs seven times in Revelation. Here it is some sort of ID for the loyal followers of this beast and his boss, the Devil. It is not a visible mark, like a tattoo, or something like that. No, it is your attitude as it shows in what you think and say (forehead) and how you act (right hand). And what are the consequences?

Think of your Costco membership card. You cannot shop at Costco if you are not a member. But that is not a big deal. You can shop elsewhere. Here the consequences are much more dramatic. Consider v.17. If it is not clear from what you say and how you act that you belong to this antichristian monster, if you refuse to declare that you agree with the modern antichristian values, they no longer want customers like you.

You will need this ID to survive. If you do not, you'll have no access to goods and services. You will not be able to carry out your business in any form or shape. You will be reduced to poverty, and eventually starve to death.

But here is our problem as God's children. We already have something on our foreheads remember? That is the 'seal of the Lamb'. We have heard about that in Rev. 7:3, and we will hear about it again in Rev. 14:1. And you cannot have both. It is either one or the other; you belong to the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ **OR** you belong to Satan and his malicious sidekick. There is no neutral ground here.

The 'seal of the Lamb' protects against God's judgments. That is great. That is full of comfort. But is that enough, when the evil powers makes your life miserable, because you do not have the 'mark of the beast'?

EVIL'S FAILURE

This exposition of the true nature of evil makes for a pretty scary picture of the world we live in. It is a frightening perspective for you and me, for all

of God's people, for the church, to become more and more marginalized in the world, because we do not have the 'mark of the beast'.

And yet, even in severe tribulation, in the most dreadful days that precede Jesus' return, there will be faithful believers in this world, people who trust that all things remain under God's control. John's vision of these two beasts is not only a forewarning, it is also encouraging. That is right, encouraging. It encourages us to open our eyes and recognize the ultimate failure of evil.

Remember, in these visions the glorified Christ gives John, and us, the view from above, from heaven, so that we see things that we do not see from here, from below. From the perspective of its followers this frightening monster is an impressive god-like power, with unlimited authority. But the perspective from above shows that he is subject to God's plan, and that he can only operate with God's permission.

Do not be afraid! Sure, Satan can summon his helpers out of the sea and the land. But in Rev. 10 we saw God's mighty angel *standing on the sea and the land*. It looks like our world, controlled by evil, can only yield evil. But that is not true. This whole bunch will fail. God remains in control. That is why it says several times throughout this chapter, that *he* (either the first or second beast) *was given*, or, *was allowed*. (that's in the v.5, 7, 14 and 15).

This identifies the holy and almighty God as the major Actor in this story.

Yes, he alone is the only all-powerful One, despite the beast's claims. Even when *all who dwell on earth will worship the beast* (v.8), in the end all opposition against God will turn out to be futile. From his throne, the glorified Christ shows us evil's inevitable failure. Hold on to this view, this perspective, when it seems impossible to restrain the evil powers in this world.

Many will worship the monstrous evil powers that operate among us and seem to be so successful. And what will happen if you refuse? "Be encouraged," says Christ, "for your citizenship is secure in heaven" (compare Philippians 3:20,21). If you refuse to worship the evil beast, you may know, writes John, *that your names have been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain* (v.8). This "book of life" is mentioned six times in Revelation. It is the register of those who belong to the Lamb of God, to Jesus Christ.

Believe in him and you will never perish. Trust that the war against God's people (v.7) will only go as far as God allows. Trust that the evil powers will fail to change God's eternal plan of salvation. Don't be scared when you get to know the true nature of evil, but hold on to your comfort that *before the foundation of the world* God chose you to be saved by the blood of Jesus.

Can you be sure of that? *If anyone has an ear, let him hear*, says John in v.9. Listen carefully to God's Word and recognize the promised failure of Satan and his nasty sidekicks. In faith embrace your Saviour and remember that he alone brings eternal life and that his kingdom will last forever.

No, that does not mean that when you belong to the Lamb of God and your names are written in the 'book of life', you will escape captivity or death when the evil darkness covers the world (v.10).

Persecution will be a terrible reality. The question each one of us must ask ourselves is: what do we do in such times? Should we be intimidated? The answer is 'NO'. For the reality is also that the power of evil is limited. This calls us, as believers, to show *endurance* in resisting the values of the beast and its followers. It calls us to show *faith* in holding on to the testimony of Jesus (v.10).

It also calls for *wisdom* (v.18). We repeat, do not be intimidated by the beast. He has a number. And I want you to recognize with *spiritual wisdom*, says John, that this can be calculated, because it is just a human number, 666. This evil beast claims to be divine, but he is not. Then he would have the number seven. But he does not!

Triple six is a six, reinforced by six tens and six hundreds. So yes, this beast does represent a horrendous concentration of powerful evil. But do not be deceived. Take the look from above and know that he is not almighty and he never will be!

Let the number 666 comfort and encourage you. In the end all the evil the dragon can produce, supported by these two beasts and all their worshippers will be a huge failure!

Remain faithful to your Saviour Jesus.

He will turn out to be stronger, because he has already won the victory.

3. In verse 16 it says that *the earth came to the help of the woman*. How does God use the earth, his creation to protect or sustain his church?
4. When the dragon [Satan] cannot destroy the church, he turns to the believers individually and personally (verse 17): *those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus*. See also 1 Peter 5: 8, 9. How can we personally protect ourselves against those attacks of Satan?

Chapter 20 – Revelation 13

1. The beast from the sea represents the evil, antichristian political powers, inspired by Satan to resist God's authority and driven by the desire to destroy God's work and God's people. How does this square with the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 13:1-7?
2. Imagine that the efforts of the two beasts will be successful, in the sense that they will be able to create a world without war, without poverty and hunger, without racism and other social injustice. Would that make the church, faith in God and in Jesus Christ, as well as Christian living superfluous? If you think so, why? If not, why not?
3. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and 1 John 4:1-6. How do these passages help us better understand Revelation 13?
4. The ultimate difference between Christians and non-Christians is a difference in worldview. What is a worldview and what makes a Christian worldview different from other worldviews? In the big picture of God's plan and providence, what was the purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ in the world? How does this affect your worldview? And how does your worldview affect you personally?

Chapter 21 – Revelation 14:1-13

1. In reference to the beginning of this chapter (the story of Ryan Bell), what difference does God make in your life?
2. The 144,000, mentioned in Rev. 14, are called (v.4) *redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb*. In the O.T. 'firstfruits' represent the whole harvest still to come (see Leviticus 23:9-14). Would this suggest that the 144,000 are only a fraction of the whole,