

Who's the 'Beast' in the Book of Revelation?

NOTE: This is part one of a two-part series.

As far back as I can remember, people have been speculating about the identity of the "Antichrist," an evil figure referenced in portions of the New Testament.

After President Ronald Wilson Reagan was shot and miraculously recovered in 1981, people made the ridiculous assertion that he was the prophesied evil figure of "*end times*." It didn't help that his first, middle and last name all had six letters (666).

At that same time, others argued that the Antichrist was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev or Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. Less than a decade later, evangelical and Pentecostal Christians were insisting that the "*Man of sin*" was actually Iraqi Saddam Hussein in the land once known as Babylon.

Later, I learned that previous generations believed that the Antichrist was Benito Mussolini, Prime Minister of Italy, or Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany. The actual listing of individuals identified with this role is quite long and ludicrous. Whatever nation happens to be the current enemy of America (or Israel) usually supplies us with the current candidate for the Antichrist.[1]

Obviously, there's a lot of misunderstanding and misapplication here. Many of our collective anxieties and fears are coloring our readings of the Bible. We're bringing into the text things Scripture never actually articulates. Much of this happens because of our confusion about the Bible and ignorance of the apocalyptic genre. We don't comprehend its intended meaning or its use of fierce imagery and symbols.

Where's the "Antichrist" in the Book of Revelation?

I want to begin this exploration by pointing out that there's no direct reference to the "Antichrist" in the book of Revelation. The term "Antichrist" only occurs five times in the Bible and all references are in the epistles of John. In the singular form, "Antichrist" is found in 1 John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3 and 2 John 1:7. Surprisingly, John also speaks of many antichrists (plural) in 1 John 2:18. Talking about this identity and role, John declares the following:

"And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and is already in the world" (1 John 4:3).

In this passage, the "antichrist" is depicted as a type of "spirit" that affects unrighteous people and that it was already in the world in the first century. On the basis of this verse alone, we see that this term has a much different meaning than what popular religious thinking espouses.

The "Beast" of Revelation

As I previously mentioned, the term "Antichrist" isn't found in the book of Revelation. However, many have observed what they consider to be a comparable term—"Beast." This depiction, found in chapters 13 and 17, describes a demonically inspired political leader who subverts God's people. Revelation's depiction of the "Beast" is the one that keeps people awake at night—fearful about the future.

As we move into this study, I must acknowledge that much of the data about the Beast is difficult to understand, mainly because of the literary style John employs. As already suggested, there's a lot of symbolism and fierce imagery. The words just aren't composed in a form that we're used to.

The question we are really trying to answer is “*Who is the Beast of Revelation?*” Is he some futuristic political leader or something else? Are we looking for him to come forth in the future or did he already come at some point in the past? In the following, we are going to look at aspects of the Bible and history to answer this question.

When we pose the question of the meaning of “*beastly imagery*” in the book of Revelation, we find that it shifts between the generic and the specific. Sometimes the Beast is pictured as a kingdom and sometimes as an individual leader in a kingdom.

For example, in some passages, “*the Beast*” has seven heads, which are seven kings collectively considered. In Revelation 13:1, John declares that he “saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads.” A few chapters later, he specifically declares that the seven heads represent “seven kings.”

“Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while” (Rev. 17:9-10).

Seven kings are to rise in chronological succession; some have already died, one is now reigning, one is yet to come (Rev. 17:10-11). Thus, the Beast is, on some level, portrayed as a “kingdom.”

However, “the Beast” is also spoken of as an individual. John urges his readers to “*calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man*” (Rev. 13:18). This is an important passage that we’ll come back to a number of times as the identity of the Beast is explored.

5 Key Indicators



There are a lot of different directions that we could go with this, but if we are going to clarify the meaning of the “Beast” of Revelation, then we need to genuinely engage the Bible. Only the perimeters of the text should be allowed to define our understanding—not popular cataclysmic myths.

Let’s take a look at five key indicators from the book of Revelation.

1. The beast must be “*a man*” (Rev. 13:18b).
2. This man must be someone of an evil, idolatrous and blasphemous nature.
3. This man must also possess “*great authority*” (Rev. 13:2, 7). This demands that he be a political figure, particularly in that “upon his heads are ten diadems.”

These first three indicators correspond to what people were thinking in my childhood. These are descriptors that are shared by those driven by apocalyptic concerns. People have certainly applied this to Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Yet there are some other attributes that must also be considered if we really want to know the identity of the Beast of Revelation. We are going to look at them in the next two indicators.

4. The Beast must be one of John’s contemporaries. This is due to the immediacy of John’s vision. He makes it very clear in a number of passages that the events of Revelation are to occur “*soon*” (Rev. 1:1) because “*the time is at hand*” (Rev. 1:3). He understood that “The Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show to His servants the things which must soon take place” (Rev. 22:6). John clearly saw this figure as someone within his lifespan.

5. The “Beast” must be an individual who is relevant to first-century Christians in the seven churches John wrote to (Rev. 1:4, 11). John expected people from these churches to listen and respond to what he was writing (Rev. 1:3). If it had no

relevance to them, this wouldn't make any sense. He also asked them to actually calculate the Beast's number (Rev. 13:18). How could they do this if the Beast were some shadowy figure far removed from their own situation?

Be sure to read part two of this article, where I reveal who best fits John's description of the Beast. {eoa}

[1] People wrongly assert that Kim Jong-un of North Korea, along with Ali Khamenei or Mahmoud Ahmandinejad of Iran, are current candidates to be the "Antichrist." I wonder who it will be next decade?

J.D. King *is the director of the World Revival Network and associate pastor at World Revival Church.*