

666 – The Second Beast of the Book of Revelation

Exegesis of the second pericope of Rev 13

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Abstract

In this paper, I develop an exegesis of the second pericope of the 13th chapter of the book of Revelation, “The false prophet as the slave of the beast”. The paper begins describing the apocalyptic literary style and then develops an exegesis using the technique of the semiotic interpretation. Finally, a hermeneutical actualization is made to apply the meaning of the text to our present historical context. This paper is a translation from the article written in Spanish by the same author, published in year 2000 in the Apologetics review of the Pontifical Institute of Bible in Rome.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

[**Biblical Exegesis**]: New Testament

Keywords

Exegesis, pericope. hermeneutics

1. INTRODUCTION

The second beast described by the book of Revelation is better known by its number, 666. It has been a subject of confusion, in great part due to biblical ignorance, but most of all, by those spectacular movies who take joy in addressing this topic with all degrees of freedom. In our times, there are some who try to identify an “anti-Christ” who has all the characteristics described in Rev, and with curiosity make speculations, but lacking of support to validate the so claimed coincidences they find. And this happens not only with the beast, but also with all the symbols used in this book, trying to find “the truth” in the signs of our times, disregarding the fact that the authentic meaning of Rev is placed in a precise historical timeframe and within a well determined context, different from our present days.

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My motivation for writing this paper is to develop a brief exegesis of the pericope titled “The false prophet as the slave of the beast”, with the purpose of clearing up, from an exegetical point of view, the true meaning of this passage of the bible. The exegesis presented in this paper was developed by me, keeping my work always within the frame of the “healthy doctrine” of our Catholic Church, and following the line of modern exegesis. The exegesis method to be followed is the semiotic analysis.

I will use the biblical notation required by the Pontifical Biblical Institute for its publications, instead of the English notation. This means that to indicate for example that a text is taken from the book of Revelation, chapter 12 verse 18 to chapter 13 verse 10, it will be indicated by Rev 12,18 – 13,10 instead of Rev 12:18-13:10.

2. THEORETIC CONSIDERATIONS

Before I begin developing my exegesis, I consider important to explain the elements that serve us as solid (and correct) material for the interpretation of this passage. The biblical text is taken entirely from the English edition of the New Jerusalem Bible.

2.1 Literary style

The Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse of John, corresponds to the “apocalyptic” literary style. This style flourished in the Hebrew literature along four centuries, from II BC to II AD. Apocalyptic writing depends on Prophetic and Sapiential literatures. But different from the prophetic style, in which the central element is “the word”, in the apocalyptic style the main element is “the vision”.

The structure of an apocalypse is always formed by three phases:

- 1) A phase of oppression of the People of God.
- 2) A phase of punishment and destruction of the enemy.
- 3) A phase of liberation, victory, and domain of the People of God.

In an apocalypse, it is important to distinguish the teaching behind “the vision”, from the story that narrates “the vision”. The

contents of an apocalypse are eschatological and historical at the same time. For this reason, its teaching lasts till the end of times. However, being historical, its story refers always to an immediate moment in history, for apocalyptic texts are written during a time of strong oppression. It is with these eyes that Rev must be interpreted (and in consequence, the pericope analyzed in this paper) if we seek a correct understanding of its meaning. Nevertheless, with good hermeneutics, we can make an actualization of its doctrinal contents, which can be applied to our present days.

2.2 Interpretation Clues

In order to understand not only the contents of the pericope, but also the contents of all the book of Revelation, a prerequisite is to know the apocalyptic symbols used in the book of the prophet Daniel. And to understand the symbols of Dn, we must understand the symbol used by the prophet Ezekiel. This is of utmost importance, because by understanding the symbology of Ez and Dn the exegesis of the Apocalypse of John becomes an easier (and sometimes straight forward) task. Listing such symbology and making an interpretation of it is out of the scope of this work. But I mention this for the reader who wishes to make a deeper study on this subject.

It is also important, in the case of our pericope, to understand the meaning of the First Beast, which is described in the previous chapter. I will elaborate on it in the section of this paper titled "Immediate Context".

As I mentioned before, apocalyptic texts are written during a time of oppression. In the case of Rev, the consensus is that it was written in 95 AD. At the time, Domitian demanded the "imperial cult" with more emphasis than his predecessors, Vespasian and Titus. It is in this historical context that we must seek the true meaning of the symbols used by John.

2.3 Apocalyptic Numerology

All numbers used in apocalyptic literature have a special meaning. Knowing this meaning helps to understand the symbols found in the text. For the exegesis of our pericope, it is convenient to know the following:

All material on each page should fit within a rectangle of 18 x 23.5 cm (7" x 9.25"), centered on the page, beginning 2.54 cm (1") from the top of the page and ending with 2.54 cm (1") from the bottom. The right and left margins should be 1.9 cm (.75").

Table 1. Some numbers and their meaning

Number	Meaning
2	Used to reinforce, vg. two witnesses, two horns
3	Perfection
6	One less than 7, it means imperfection
7	Plenitude
666	6 repeated thrice, i.e. the perfect imperfection, the total imperfection

3. THE PERICOPE

The false prophet as the slave of the beast

¹¹Then I saw a second beast, emerging from the ground; it had two horns like a lamb, but made a noise like a dragon. ¹²This second beast exercised all the power of the first beast, on its behalf making the world and all its people worship the first beast, whose deadly injury had healed. ¹³And it worked great miracles, even to calling down fire from heaven onto the earth while people watched. ¹⁴Through the miracles which it was allowed to do on behalf of the first beast, it was able to lead astray the people of the world and persuade them to put up a statue in honour of the beast that had been wounded by the sword and still lived. ¹⁵It was allowed to breathe life into this statue, so that the statue of the beast was able to speak, and to have *anyone who refused to worship the statue* of the beast put to death. ¹⁶It compelled everyone—small and great aside, rich and poor, slave and citizen—to be branded on the right hand or on the forehead, ¹⁷and made it illegal for anyone to buy or sell anything unless he had been branded with the name of the beast or with the number of its name.

¹⁸There is need for shrewdness here: anyone clever may interpret the number of the beast: it is the number of a human being, the number 666.

4. EXEGESIS

4.1 Delimitation

The first step in the exegesis of the pericope is to define its boundaries.

4.1.1 Immediate Context

The pericope "The false prophet as the slave of the beast" finds its boundaries on the two pericopes titled "The dragon delegates his power to the beast (12,18 – 13,10), and "The companions of the Lamb" (14,1-13)

4.1.1.1 The dragon delegates his power to the beast (Rev 12,18-13,10)

In this pericope John sees emerging from the sea a beast with 10 horns and seven heads, with a coronet on each of his horns, and its heads marked with blasphemous titles. The beast of the sea was like a leopard with bear paws and lion mouth, and it received from the dragon its throne and great power (13, 1-3). People prostrated themselves before the dragon and the beast, and worship them (13,4-8). John concludes with a warning, "Let anyone who can hear, listen: *Those for captivity to captivity; those for death by the sword to death by the sword. This is why the saints must have perseverance and faith.*" (13,9-10).

The sea, in Eastern literature, is an element associated to chaos, to the abyss, to rebellion, to the forces of evil. The description of the beast of the sea is similar to the vision of the four beasts in Dn 7,3-8. Remembering that apocalyptic texts are written under persecution, and setting the text of Rev within its historical context, the most coherent thing to do is to associate the beast that emerges from the sea with the Roman Empire, which had great

power and a quite significant territory extension. The Roman Empire is the prototype of all the powers that will rise against the Church along the times.

The ten horns and the ten coronets represent 10 Roman kings. The seven heads with blasphemous titles symbolize seven emperors. We have to note that the two numbers used, 7 and 10, are a symbol of totality.

The power of the beast extends upon all race, people, language and nation, and its power comes from the dragon. Just as the Roman Empire continues to extend. Verse 3 mentions a head fatally wounded, but that has healed. This could be an allusion to a specific time in which the Roman Empire was endangered, but subsisted. Some scholars prefer to understand a similitude with a legend that said that Nero, after taking his own life, would return to take the power of Rome.

The beast mouths its blasphemies against God, makes the war against the saints, and is worshipped by all the people of the world whose name has not been written down since the foundation of the world, in the book of life of the sacrificial Lamb. The Roman Empire fiercely persecuted Christians, for the fact that because of their only faith in Christ Jesus, they refused to worship both the Empire and the Caesar.

This situation of rejection of God and cruel persecution requires the perseverance and faith of the saints.

As I mentioned before, the apocalyptic texts are written under a persecution. Understanding that the beast of the sea represents the Roman Empire, is probably the most solid clue to understand the second beast, as I will explain later.

4.1.1.2 The companions of the Lamb (Rev 14,1-5)

In this pericope, John finds the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and forty four thousand people with him. They all have the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father written on their foreheads.

A fundamentalist interpretation of this number, as the one proposed by the Jehovah Witnesses, wants to affirm that only 144,000 souls can enter into Heaven. Nothing could be more wrong.

John opposes the followers of the Lamb to the followers of the Beast and groups the first in a symbolic way on Zion, near Jerusalem, the Holy City chosen by God. They represent the new Israel. The number 144,000 is equivalent to $12 \times 12 \times 1000$, which is a superlative of a number that means totality. It does not refer to a specific number of people. This number refers to those who have been rescued, i.e. those who have reached salvation. According to the pericope, the virtues of these rescued people are: they have kept their virginity and have not been defiled with women; they follow the Lamb wherever he goes, they have been redeemed to be the first fruits for God and for the Lamb, no lie was found in their mouths, and no fault can be found in them (cf Psalm 30). It is significant the fact that they are the “first fruits”, because it indicates that this number does not refer to all those redeemed, but only to a group of them. Perhaps, those who have given their lives for their faith, the martyrs, which makes total sense, for the “first fruits” are intended to be used in a sacrifice.

4.1.2 Broad Context

Our pericope is found in the first big section “The Prelude to the Great Days of God” of the second chapter of Rev “The Prophetic Visions”. This chapter contains the following pericopes:

God entrusts the future of the world to the Lamb (4 – 5)

The Lamb breaks the seven seals (6)

God’s servant will be preserved (7,1-8)

The rewarding of the saints (7,9-17)

The seventh seal (8,1)

The prayers of the saints bring the coming of the great Day nearer (8,2-5)

The first four trumpets (8,6-13)

The fifth trumpet (9,1-12)

The sixth trumpet (9,13-21)

The imminence of the last punishment (10,1-7)

The seer eats the small scroll (10,8-11)

The two witnesses (11,1-14)

The seventh trumpet (11,15-19)

The vision of the woman and the dragon (12)

The dragon delegates its power to the beast (13,1-10)

The false prophet as the slave of the beast (13,1-18)

The companions of the Lamb (14,1-5)

Angels announce the Day of Judgment (14,6-13)

The harvest and vintage of the gentiles (14,14-20)

The hymn of Moses and the Lamb (15,1-4)

The seven bowls of plagues (15,5-16,21)

4.2 Actors

John – The author of Rev introduces himself as John (1,1.4.9; 22,8), a man who due to his faith, suffered the exile in Patmos, an island that served as a penitentiary for Rome. In spite of his name, it is hard to associate it with the name of John the Apostle, or the same author (or even authors) of the fourth Gospel or the Joannine letters. The author of Rev does not speak of himself as of an Apostle. Some Fathers of the Church identified him with the Apostle, too likely because of the name affinity, including Justine, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Hippolytus. But others like Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem and even Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, denied this fact. The vocabulary, grammar, and style of the text makes it doubtful to think that the book of Revelation was written by the same persons responsible for the other texts in the New Testament signed by “John”. In the other hand, in text we can find linguistic similitude and theological affinity with the fourth gospel, which makes us suppose that the author of the last book of the Bible could very well have been a disciple of John the Apostle.

In this pericope, John appears as the receptor of a new vision in which he contemplates the second beast.

The first beast – As I explained before, the author or Rev represents the Roman Empire with a beast emerging from the sea.

The second beast – Emerging from the ground, and beginning on this pericope, Rev will refer to the second beast as the “false prophet” who serves the first beast, i.e. the Roman Empire, and speaks for it.

People of the world – All the people of the world are seduced by the second beast.

Those who refused to worship the first beast – Understanding that the first beast refers to the Roman Empire, it is easy to realize that those who refuse to worship the statue of the first beast are the Christians, for they refused to obey the law of the Imperial Cult, which implied worshipping the *Divus Caesar*, and the *Dea Roma*.

The clever man – This is the way John speaks of he who can interpret the number of the second beast: 666.

4.3 Interpretation of the pericope

¹¹*Then I saw a second beast, emerging from the ground; it had two horns like a lamb, but made a noise like a dragon.*

The horn is a symbol of authority in the Apocalypse. We see that the person symbolized by the beast of the ground not one, but two horns, i.e. he was someone with high authority.

¹²*This second beast exercised all the power of the first beast, on its behalf making the world and all its people worship the first beast, whose deadly injury had healed.*

Considering that the first beast is the Roman Empire, it is easy to understand that the second beast is the apocalyptic symbol to represent a minister of Rome. As I explained before, someone of high authority. We can infer hence, that the second beast symbolizes an emperor. Emperors had the mission of the Empire to ensure its well known territorial extension “making the world and all its people worship the first beast”.

¹³*And it worked great miracles, even to calling down fire from heaven onto the earth while people watched.*

We note a warning signal against the seduction of idolatry, according to the second edition of the Law of Moses. The book of Deuteronomy indicates that if a prophet appears and proposes a signal or a deed, and asks people to follow unknown gods, such prophet should not be listened to (cf Dt 13,2-4)

Christ himself warns about the coming of these false prophets who drag their followers to perdition (Mt 24,24). It is interesting to note that this warning (and prediction) of Christ is contained precisely in his Eschatological Discourse, an text that is eminently apocalyptic.

We find the same in the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, where Paul anticipates the coming of the “wicked One” will be marked by Satan being at work in all kinds of counterfeit miracles and signs and wonders, and every wicked deception aimed at

those who are on the way to destruction because they would not accept the love of the truth to be saved. (2 Ts,9-10). Another text of apocalyptic style.

The parallel between this verse and these two passages is evident.

¹⁴*Through the miracles which it was allowed to do on behalf of the first beast, it was able to lead astray the people of the world and persuade them to put up a statue in honour of the beast that had been wounded by the sword and still lived.*

The Spirit of God is the one who performed deeds in the Church to impel people to believe. The second beast emulates the Spirit, just as the serpent and the first beast emulated the Father and the Son. This way, the dragon, the first and the second beast are an antithetical satire of the Trinity: Father-Son-Holy Spirit vs. Dragon-first beast- second beast.

¹⁵*It was allowed to breathe life into this statue, so that the statue of the beast was able to speak, and to have anyone who refused to worship the statue of the beast put to death.*

Christians always refused to worship the Empire and the Caesar. We see here that the second beast who eliminated the Christians was a fierce persecutor of them. This begins to give light to the inference of its name. With the elements mentioned so far, we know the second beast symbolizes a Roman emperor who persecuted Christians.

¹⁶*It compelled everyone –small and great alike, rich and poor, slave and citizen– to be branded on the right hand or on the forehead,*

The tattoo on the hand and forehead makes us think of the imperial cult.

Later in 14,9-10, an angel will warn that those who worship the beast and his statue, or have had themselves branded on the hand or forehead, will be made to drink the wine of God’s fury, and will get disgusting and virulent sores (16,2). When the beast is taken prisoner, it will be hurled alive into the fiery lake of burning sulphur, with those who accepted branding with the mark of the beast (19,20). Undoubtedly, these are all symbols, but the deplorable attitude of those who decide to follow the beast is obvious.

On the contrary, those who refused to worship the beast and who did not accepted to be branded on the hand or the forehead, came to life, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years (20,4).

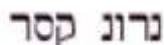
¹⁷*and made it illegal for anyone to buy or sell anything unless he had been branded with the name of the beast or with the number of its name.*

Not bearing the brand of the beast is a reason to be deprived from the daily activities of the Roman Empire, and even worse, it is a reason for losing all juridical and civil privileges.

¹⁸There is need for shrewdness here: anyone clever may interpret the number of the beast: it is the number of a human being, the number 666.

Instead of giving the name of the beast, John uses the number 666 and explains that it has to be interpreted. To sum 666, there is a great deal of combinations. To understand its meaning, we have to consider that in Greek (the language in which Rev was written) and in Hebrew, the letters of the alphabet have a numeric value, because these languages lacked of numerals.

I share the opinion that is shared by most scholars. John refers to Nero when he uses the number 666. His name in Hebrew is written as NRWN QSR (Nero Caesar), considering of course that Hebrew is written with consonants only, but not with vowels (and the vowel, do not have any numerical number anyway, and they were adapted into Hebrew writing centuries after Rev was written).



The numerical equivalence of the Hebrew letters that form the name of Nero is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Hebrew letters of the name Nero Caesar and their numerical equivalences

Hebrew letter	Name	English Equivalent	Value
נ	Nun	N	50
ך	Resh	R	+ 200
ו	Waw	W	+ 6
נ	Nun	N	+ 50
ק	Qoph	Q	+ 100
ס	Samekh	S	+ 60
ך	Resh	R	+ 200
TOTAL:			= 666

In Greek, the letters add 616. For this reason, some versions of the Bible (very few) use this number instead of 666. In such case, 616 does not mean “Nero Caesar”, but “God Caesar”. Anyhow, everything seems to coincide very strongly with Nero, one of the cruelest persecutors of Christians in the Roman Empire. We know how, among his tortures, he would tie Christians to poles¹ along the paths of his palace gardens and made them burn alive, so they served as torches.

¹ Too likely these poles would have been crosses of the form *crux simplex*

We must also remember that 6 is the number used to represent imperfection in the apocalyptic literature, for it lies behind number 7, the plenitude. The fact that the 6 is repeated thrice is significant, because three is the symbol of perfection. Repeating three times the number 6 is the superlative expression of imperfection, the perfect imperfection, the total imperfection. An antithesis to the “thrice Holy”, the “Holy, holy, holy” acclamation we use to exalt the holiness of God, the “All Holy”.

5. ACTUALIZATION

False prophets, Christianity persecutors, as well as pagan and materialistic seductions will always threat all the people of the world. However, the faithful Christians who persevere on their faith will overcome these tests.

6. CONCLUSION

Who read this paper in seek of clues or even specific names of contemporary antichrists was disappointed in the end for sure. Apocalyptic literature is difficult to understand because of the big amount of symbols it uses. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the correct hermeneutical clues, and the familiarity with the texts of Ez and Dn makes the book of Revelation easier to understand.

Hebrew lacks of numeric characters, and uses the letters of its alphabet to represent numbers. This way, the name of Nero Caesar, when written with Hebrew letters, coincides with the number 666.

The book of Revelation was written within a context of Christian persecution by the Roman Empire. It is in this historical context that the symbols of Rev find their true meaning. However, the meaning and the teaching of its text are eschatological. For this reason, if there is anything inside this text that we must apply to our times, characterized for the constant attack to our Christian beliefs, is the teaching of faith and hope developed along the text. This is more important than trying to use the symbols of the text as a reference of cataclysmic events that will fustigate our world.

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