



## [Revelation 13:11-18](#)

The vision of the beast

**Date:** 80 CE to 100 CE

**Place:** Patmos

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** New Testament and Christian

**Literary genre:** Apocalypse and Letter

**Title of work:** Revelation/The Apocalypse of John

**Reference:** 13:11-18

**Commentary:**

Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, is one of the most complex works in the New Testament. Before addressing the present passage it will be useful, particularly for contextual purposes, to briefly introduce the text as a whole. Most scholars agree that we can know little about the author, except that he was accepted by those he wrote to as a Jewish-Christian prophet. Revelation begins with a certain "John" on the island of Patmos in the Aegean, writing to the "Seven Churches of Asia." What follows is a description of prophetic visions, leading up to the return of Jesus Christ. The text as we now have it has often been dated to 81-96 CE, while the emperor Domitian was in power. However, some have also argued for composition under Vespasian (69-79 CE) (see Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, p. 3). Composition under Domitian still remains the most popular argument (for a list of the supporting factors, see Ben Witherington, *Revelation*, p. 3-4), although a safer estimate is some time between 80-100 CE. Revelation does not often quote directly from the Hebrew Bible, but heavily alludes to and echoes the Scriptures. In particular, Daniel, Ezekiel, Psalms, and Isaiah are clearly sources of influence (on this topic, see Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament*). The once popular view was that the text was written to offer encouragement to persecuted Christians at the hands of Domitian (see Philip A. Harland, "Honouring the Emperor," and for an analysis of Suetonius, *Domitian XIII.2*, from which the argument for persecution was developed, see Stephen J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, p. 147-148). However, recently this understanding has been abandoned by many scholars, as Domitian is no longer viewed as a tyrant imposing the imperial cult, and it is no longer believed that under this emperor there was any kind of systematic persecution of Christians across the empire (see Mark Stephens, *Annihilation Or Renewal* p. 143-145, and Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, esp. p. 171-172, who argues that the tyrannical image of Domitian is misleading, and partly due to his presentation by senatorial writers such as Tacitus and Suetonius, whom he was regularly at odds with). Consequently, scholars have tended to focus in more recent years on the fact that Revelation stems from intra-community conflict among the Christians of Asia Minor, arguing over how much, if at all, they should continue to be a part of wider Greco-Roman society. Essentially, Revelation speaks against those wishing to accommodate with wider society, and "reveals" it as evil, demonic, and the recipient of eventual divine wrath and punishment.

The "first beast" which this passage refers to (verse 12) has previously been described earlier in chapter 13 coming out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, and with diadems and blasphemous names on its horns and heads respectively. One of the beast's heads is described as having a mortal wound, which has been healed. This beast is given power and authority by a great dragon which has swooped down from heaven (Revelation 12:3-4; 13-18), and the whole earth proceeds to worship both creatures in great awe of their power. Subsequently, this first beast, also speaking blasphemous words, is allowed to reign for forty-two months, during which it conquers every people and commands the worship of all the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 13:5-8). The beast introduced in the present passage makes the entire earth worship the first beast, producing images of it and condemning to death those who refuse to venerate it (verses 13-15). One of the most popular interpretations is that the first beast of chapter 13 represents the emperor Nero (the healed mortal wound being that which he inflicted upon himself at his suicide: Suetonius, *Nero XLIX*). It is argued that the author of Revelation draws upon the popular *Nero redivivus* myth, which hoped or feared he would return from the dead, or from Parthia, to where many believed he had fled (see, for example, *Sibylline Oracles* V:488-490; VIII:92 and Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse XXI On Beauty* 10; a late echo of this tradition may also found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 56 - according to a legend, Rabbi Meir, one of the last tannaim, was a descendant of Nero, who it is claimed had converted to Judaism). Moreover, the much debated number of the beast (verse 17) is now most commonly understood to be an



instance of *gematria*, with the number 666 referring to the numerical value of “Nero Caesar” when written in Hebrew letters (see Stuckenbruck, “Revelation,” p. 1557). The second beast, then, may refer to one of Nero’s successors. However, for an argument against Revelation’s employment of the *Nero redivivus* myth, see Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts*, p. 257, where it is argued that even if the author knew of the myth, it rarely speaks of Nero resurrecting from the dead to rule the empire again. Moreover, as Christopher Frilingos argues, Revelation is too complex to pin point any specific moment of Christian persecution, and it is perhaps unnecessary to read specific Roman emperors onto every particular beast. Rather, the text as a whole seeks to do something broader than condemn, for instance, Nero or Domitian – the author sets the entirety of Roman authority against that of God/Jesus. In this sense, the beasts described above can be any or all Roman emperors (*Spectacles of Empire*, p. 3).

One of the most intriguing aspects of this passage is the mention of the “mark” (???????) of the beast, which all people, great and small, rich and poor, slave and free are required to wear. The term had a variety of uses, including an official stamp on documents and the impression on coins. For J. Nelson Kraybill, the author of Revelation uses the term to encompass everything “related to the imperial cult,” and probably draws on a range of inspirations. Kraybill suggests that one such example of inspiration might be the mark on the body which signified participation in pagan cult and civic status, mentioned, for example, in the legendary story of 3 Maccabees 2:28-31 when King Ptolemy tries to enforce the cult of Dionysus upon Alexandrian Jews, having those who complied branded with a symbol of Dionysus (an ivy leaf). Kraybill argues that if Revelation’s author was aware of this story, he may have used the “mark” as a first-century parallel to the branding of the Jews. This was not in a literal sense, but in the sense that like the legendary Alexandrian Jews described in the third book of the Maccabees who chose to wear the mark of Dionysus, first-century Christians faced similar temptations with the imperial cult (see J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, p. 135-137). However, it is difficult to know how widely 3 Maccabees was known/read, and in which parts of the empire, therefore Kraybill’s connection of this work with Revelation here remains extremely tenuous. As Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther (*Unveiling Empire*, p. 103) show, the imperial cult was present in all but two of the seven cities that the author of Revelation addressed his letter to, an imperial altar in all but one, and an imperial priest in all but two. Therefore, Roman imperial religion was something that the Christians of Asia Minor could not easily avoid.

Alternatively/additionally, the author may have had in mind the fact that Christian merchants would not have been able to avoid handling the “mark” on money when they traded in the international market, as many Roman coins bore impressions or inscriptions alluding to the imperial cult. According to Ernst Janzen (“Jesus of the Apocalypse,” p. 650), the beast has an almost certain “financial component,” its “image” (?????) which causes all to be marked (verses 14) and allows them to buy and sell things (verse 17) referring to the images of the emperor printed on coins. Indeed, coins minted in Nero’s reign sometimes depicted him with a radiate crown, associated with divinity. For Christians, such elevation of the emperor to the status of a divinity was completely contrary to their sole belief in one true God, and likely problematic for those active in the commercial world coming into frequent contact with coins and also documentation which might bear the “stamp of imperial religion,” including cultic emblems in addition to the name and regnal year of the emperor. For those who follow Christ, there is simply no place for a deified ruler – one must either bear the “seal of God” (perhaps referring to baptism: Revelation 7:3; 9:4) or the “mark of the beast,” as the two are mutually exclusive in the eyes of the author of Revelation (see J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, p. 138-140). If Christians were to follow this line of argument, then it would mean their withdrawal from various aspects of daily life, such as trade guilds and cultic participation. As William Barclay (*The Revelation of John*, p. 107) once noted, this could amount to “commercial suicide” and cause the Christian to lose both social and economic status, and many probably chose to participate in the emperor cult purely for pragmatic reasons. However, the idea of Christian merchants in Asia Minor during the period in which Revelation was written is somewhat problematic, and arises from the erroneous assumption that there were Jewish merchants at this time, an assumption for which we have no strong evidence. Most Diaspora Jews at this point were small artisans, not wealthy merchants who would be rich enough to worry about losing economic standing as Kraybill suggests.

Keywords in the original language:

- [??](#)
- [??????](#)
- [?????](#)



- [??????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [?????????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [?????????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [???????](#)
- [?????](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [beast](#)
- [deceit](#)
- [Domitian](#)
- [dragon](#)
- [image](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [lamb](#)
- [name](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [numerology](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [sword](#)
- [vision](#)
- [wisdom](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Stephens, Mark B., [\*Annihilation Or Renewal? The Meaning and Function of New Creation in the Book of Revelation\*](#) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011)

Harland, Philip A., ["Honouring the Emperor or Assailing the Beast: Participation in Civic Life Among Associations \(Christian, Jewish, and Other\) in Asia Minor and the Apocalypse of John"](#), *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77 (2000) : 99-121

Friesen, Steven J., [\*Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins\*](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Thompson, Leonard L., [\*The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire\*](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Moyise, Steve, [\*The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation\*](#) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994)

Witherington III, Ben, [\*Revelation\*](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Smalley, Stephen S., [\*The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse\*](#) (London: SPCK, 2005)

Massyngberde Ford, J., [\*Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary\*](#) (New York: Doubleday, 1975)

Kraybill, J. Nelson, [\*Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse\*](#) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996)

Frilingos, Christopher A. , [\*Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation\*](#) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

Janzen, Ernst, ["The Jesus of the Apocalypse Wears the Emperor's Clothes"](#), in *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers* (ed. E. H. Lovering Jr.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 637-661

Barclay, William, [\*The Revelation of John. I\*](#) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976)

Howard-Brook, Wes, Gwyther, Anthony, [\*Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now\*](#) (New York: Orbis Books, 1999)

King Wai Siew, Antoninus , [\*The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5\*](#) (London: T&T Clark, 2005)

Koester, Craig R., [\*Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary\*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014)

Aune, David E., [\*Revelation\*](#) (Word Biblical Commentaries; 3 Volumes; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997)

**Realized by:**



[Kimberley Fowler](#)



**Source URL:** <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/revelation-1311-18>