After describing the first beast as an agent of Satan in chapter 13 and drawing a number of connections to that, the author now, in verses 3-8, we begin to see the author describing what the beast does and how the people respond and if we are to link the beast with the Roman empire, and/or the emperor, now we see what the emperor does throughout the Roman empire and we see how people respond to that.

First of all, note that the beast claims, as we mentioned a couple times already, universal worship and allegiance. Because of its apparent invincibility, the whole world now follows the beast and they worship both the dragon and the beast. It’s possible that at least at one level, this is, although at a broader level, this could just be representative of people’s understanding of Rome and their view of Rome and the allegiance they give to Rome, but more specifically this could represent the form that would take, in the form of the emperor cult. So what is portrayed here is a nation that has absolutized its power and now in arrogance and pride, demands the worship and allegiance that only belongs to God and the Lamb.

Who is like the Beast?

Note intriguingly the question that verse 4 ends with, people responding by saying, “Who is like the beast?” and “Who can make war against him?” This question, this language, not necessarily that any one person literally verbalized this, but it is simply capturing the attitude towards Rome and the way Rome is portrayed and the way people view Rome. This language comes again right out of the Old Testament. For example, back in Exodus chapter 15, the song of Moses, which we’ll see will play a key role a little bit later on in a text in Revelation, in Exodus chapter 15 in verse 11, after the Israelites are rescued from Egypt, they cross the Red Sea. Now they sing the song of Moses. Verse 11, “Who among the
gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you--majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” Isaiah chapter 44 in verse 7 is another interesting one.

Sometime you might also look Psalm chapter 89 in verse 10. Isaiah chapter 44 in verse 7, and what is significant about Isaiah 44, this is one of those texts that has the statement “you are the first and the last.” And what is important is that it is in the context of idolatry that God alone is worthy of worship. It’s idolatry to render worship and allegiance to anyone or anything other than God alone. So in chapter 44 in verse 7 of Isaiah, we read, “Who then is like me? [God says]. Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and layout before me what has happened since I established my ancient people.”

So this theme, who is like me or who is like God, now in a perverted parody is attributed to the beast and people saying, “Who is like the beast” and “Who can possibly make war against him?” So the beast is to be understood in the context of satanic imitation of God and adding to this idea of an unholy trinity, a perverted parody of the true trinity and now describing the blasphemy and the idolatry that takes place because of the claims that Rome itself is making. They are like any other empire in the Old Testament who usurped the authority that belongs only to God, that absolutizes power, that claimed absolute power and divinity and oppressed God’s people in a way that was ungodly and idolatrous.

The second thing is that note the beast blasphemes God and slanders his name and his dwelling. This is probably alluding back to Daniel chapter 7 in verses 6-8 where we see the beast doing something similar. This once more may be a reference to the emperor cult, it may also be a view of Rome as a whole. But this may more specifically reflect the emperor cult and even reflect the claims of deity that Domitian. For example, if this is the empire ruling when Revelation was written, the deity claimed by Domitian himself, and the allegiance and acclamations and even worship was often given to Domitian, particularly in association with emperor cult, at a local level in the seven cities in Asia Minor as
well as other cities.

Beast’s Activity in 42 Months

Third, note that the beast is active for 42 months and we’ve already looked at the fact that 40 suggests a time of testing, though also a time of preservation. So this mention of 42 months links the activity of the beast with what was going on in chapter 11, but also Satan’s activity in chapter 12. So this is another reason for not seeing the events of chapter 13 taking place in chronological sequence after chapter 12. But if we’re to take the three and half years or time, times, and half time, the 42 months and 1260 days as different ways of referring to the same period, then the 42 months clearly links this back with the casting out of the outer court back at the beginning of chapter 11 which represented the church at the time of tribulation and testing, also the time, times, and half the time of the two witnesses back in chapter 11. The time, times, and half the time is a period of Satan’s activity and the preservation of the woman and the persecution of her children in chapter 12. All of these events now are further being described with the mention of the 42 months. So the beast’s activity of 42 months is to be seen as covering the same period as all those other time references in earlier chapters.

Beast Making War with the Saints

The fourth thing to note is the fact that the beast makes war with the saints also connecting us back with earlier chapters. For example in chapter 11 verse 17, that’s exactly what the beast that came out of the Abyss did, he made war with the two witnesses. In chapter 12, verse 17, that’s exactly what the dragon does, then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring. So now we see specifically how the dragon makes war with the woman’s offspring, through the beast making war with the people and with the saints. So John is again unveiling the true nature of their situation to allow them to see the true source of their struggle and their persecution. Their persecution is at the hands of a demonically inspired beast.
Beast’s Claims of Sovereignty

Fifth, the beast claims sovereignty over the entire earth. Two things about this, note that, we’ll return to this, the universal language, the almost hyperbolic language of Rome has authority over the entire earth. One of the reasons for this is, that one of the dominant themes of Revelation is that we’ve already seen back in the seventh seal of Revelation chapter 11, is how the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of God and his Messiah. In other words, how does the kingdom of the earth get transferred from Satan and the beast to God and the Lamb. So by emphasizing Rome’s dominion over the entire earth, this contributes to this theme of how the transfer of the kingdom of the earth, of the world, in Revelation chapter 11, now comes into the hands and how it is transferred to the sovereignty of God and the Lamb. This explains how the sovereignty, the complete sovereignty, of God and the Lamb recognized and worshipped in chapter 4 and 5, how it eventually works out on earth. So for that reason we find the beast [Rome] claiming an authority over the entire earth.

But I want to make two observations about this. First of all, Rome’s authority being seen as universal is almost hyperbolic and perhaps that’s intentional in apocalyptic type of literature. This is the author’s way of showing the complete domination and authority that Rome wields in the present earth. But there also may be a sense that John is thinking of something more, that is, that Rome’s rule is simply part of a broader picture. Rome’s rule is simply a harbinger of and part of and anticipation of the rulership of all of the earth that has yet then to be turned over to God and his Messiah. John is drawing on a theme or a principle of the beast ruling over the entire world and now John envisions that as having its application in or manifesting itself in the first century Roman empire. So Rome, then, is simply the first century expression of this principle or this worldwide rule and empire that Christ will one day come and defeat. He has already, in his first coming, defeated, but will one day he will bring it to an end, when the kingdom of this earth will be transferred from Satan and his dominion
and now be transferred to God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ. So the hyperbole may be intentional and may reflect that John sees Rome as only the first century expression, not that John saw successive empires or a period of time as we do today, but simply that Rome was the first century manifestation of this empire that would rule over the entire world that one day Christ would come to finally defeat.

Second, note that repeated refrain in chapter 13, the beast was given authority; the beast was given this, probably suggesting once more God’s sovereignty over these events. God is the one who is in control of Satan and the beast’s activity. He is only permitted to act this way; he is only given the ability to act this way. So as we’ve seen elsewhere in Revelation, Revelation does not have a dualism where there are two powers at odds with each other, until finally God’s power overcomes the power of evil. But already God’s power is seen as usurping or over everything else. He has no rivals. Who is like God? He has no rivals! As powerful as this beast appears, there is no true dualism. God himself still remains sovereign over these events and Satan is only permitted to do what God allows him to do in his sovereignty.

So to summarize the point of the first beast, then, is to demonstrate the true cause of the saints trouble, the true source of their persecution and their difficulty caused by the Roman empire in the cities, the region of Asia Minor. The true source is that it comes from a demonically inspired beast that is the agent of Satan. It comes from the same demonically inspired beastly power that lies behind the beastly empires in Daniel chapter 7 and other rulers and empires that were idolatrous and godless and oppressed God’s people and opposed God’s rule and set itself up as the absolute power in the world. It is that same demonically inspired power that now lies behind the claims of Rome and its emperor and the attempts of Rome to oppress and destroy God’s people in the first century.

But for those who are tempted to compromise, this chapter will demonstrate what is at stake and what it is they are compromising with. Compromising with Roman rule is not a neutral thing, but compromising with Roman rule is now to be
seen as ultimately giving allegiance to Satan himself. Chapters 12 and 13 are to be
read together. The beast representing Rome is nothing less than the agent of Satan.
So for those Christians that are tempted to compromise and become complacent in
their lifestyle within the Roman empire, Revelation is a wake-up call to see
exactly what it is they are doing and exactly who it is they are giving allegiance to.
Behind their allegiance to Rome and even explicit involvement in the emperor
cult, behind that lies the worship and allegiance that they are actually giving to the
dragon, to Satan himself, from chapter 10. So, behind all of this lies chapter 12,
that is, Satan’s attempt to destroy the person of Jesus Christ and to destroy his
people. But the kicker is Satan has already been defeated, reminding the Christians
your battle is not against flesh and blood, but it’s against the rulers and authorities
of the heavenly realm. Now with that new perspective and knowledge, they’re able
to face their situation in perseverance but also in maintaining their faithful witness,
and refusing to conform, and refusing to conform to the claims of the pagan
Roman Empire.

Call for Discernment and Obedience

Now very, very briefly, verses 9 and 10 are of a different character. They’re
sort of an insertion between the first beast and the second beast. Although
breaking the narrative, if you took these verses out, the narrative would flow very
naturally from the first beast to the second beast. But in breaking the narrative,
actually what these texts are is a call for discernment and obedience. Notice it
begins “for the one who has an ear, let him hear.” In other words, this is not meant
primarily, as we’ve already seen, John is not primarily saying these things just to
satisfy the curiosity of his readers as to what is going to happen in the future or
what’s going on now. This is not meant to fuel our obsession with end time events
and figuring out when things happen in relationship to each other. This little
insertion reminds us that John is calling on his churches, in light of this, to respond
in obedience and to respond in perseverance. “The one who has ears” is repeated
from chapters 2 and 3. It is another indication that this is meant to describe the
church’s situation in chapters 2 and 3. They’re told, the one who has ears, let that person hear. Now that same language is repeated here as well.

This language, if anyone is to go into the captivity and into the captivity they will go, if they are to be killed with the sword, they will be killed with the sword, reflects language out of the Old Testament again. Jeremiah chapter 15 in verse 2, and Jeremiah 43 in verse 11. The point of all this though is to say God’s people will indeed suffer persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, but the response should be one of endurance. In other words, in view of the fact that chapters 13:1-8 and the rest of 13 has now provided an apocalyptic perspective on the situation. This now embodies the response of God’s people. It is one of endurance and persecution now that they have gained spiritual insight in the situation.

So chapter 13, much like Jesus’ parables, which were meant as symbolic ways or metaphorical ways of describing the situation of his readers, and much like Jesus’ call on them to have ears to hear, much like that, chapter 13, for those who have ears to hear, provides the spiritual insight into the situation necessary so that God’s people can respond in unhindered obedience, endurance and perseverance. But they can only do that because now they have discerned the true nature of Rome and the true nature of their struggle.

The Second Beast

That brings us to beast number two. I would once more suggest to you that beast number two in verses 11-17 is not the describing a series of events that temporally happen after verses 1-8 and beast number one, but beast number two refers to and covers the same time period and the same events as the events surrounding beast number one in verses 1-8. So that is how is the activity of beast number one gets carried out, it’s through beast number two. So, to put all this together, chapter 13 seems to be describing the same events as the end of chapter 12, with the dragon going after the woman and her offspring. How does he do that? Through beast number one. But how does beast number one carry out his
activity? It is through beast number two. And notice all the connections how the first beast now apparently gives beast number two the authority to speak on his behalf. Verse 12, he exercises the authority of the first beast on his behalf. So how does the first beast exercise his authority over all the earth? Through beast number two.

We’ll talk a little bit about who might this be, who is beast number two? How does he carry out his idolatrous persecuting authority through this beast? There are two important features of this beast. Number one note that he speaks like a dragon. This clearly connects him back to the dragon in chapter 12. He’s also been, as we’ve seen, connected with the beast because the second point to note is he exercises the authority of the first beast and works on his behalf. Now the question is, who is beast number two? If beast number one, is the Roman Empire, and perhaps the emperor himself, represented in the first beast who rules over all the earth and who makes war on the saints, then who is beast number two?

I would suggest to you that beast number two is the specific means by which the readers of Revelation living in the provinces of Rome, living in Asia Minor, will experience the authority and persecution of beast number one, of Rome or the emperor. That is, how do readers living in Asia Minor and in the seven cities introduced to you in chapters 2 and 3, how do they experience the persecuting authority of Satan and the first beast? It is through beast number two.

So I would suggest to you that beast number two may represent, without being too specific, beast number two probably represents the leaders and officials in the provinces of Asia Minor who are responsible for enforcing things like emperor worship and emperor cult and enforcing allegiance to Rome and to the emperor and for administering the consequences from failing to do so. Actually, one of the intriguing things in this text, those of you that know Greek or read Greek, in this section in verses 11 and following, we find the author choosing a tense form of verbs that you don’t find in the first part of chapter 13. He chooses a present tense, that is meant to be highly descriptive or foregrounding. The reason
he does that is, I think, is this is where chapters 12 and 13 will impact and influence the readers living in Asia Minor. This is how the authority of Satan, this is how the authority of the first beast, will reach the readers in Asia Minor, through those the leaders and officials and those in the provinces of Asia Minor and the cities who are responsible for enforcing allegiance and worship of Rome and the emperor. They are the ones actually doling out the consequences of failing to do so, without necessarily linking them into any one specific people or group of people.

Elsewhere this person is going to be called the false prophet. For example, later on in chapter 14, in chapter 20 in verse 12, this second beast, the third member of the unholy trinity, will be called the false prophet. I want to return to that. But what is intriguing here is there’s little by way of description. He is simply said to talk like a dragon and have two horns like a lamb. But what is more important is what this beast does. So, for example, he gets people to worship the first beast, which as we said may be an indication of the emperor worship in the cities of Asia Minor, which most of them had images, or most of them had temples not only to foreign gods, but most of them had temples in the honor of the emperor, imperial temples where emperor worship took place. Many of them had people, wardens over the temple, who were responsible for ensuring that temple worship was observed and maintained. But another important feature is that in verses 13-15, this beast is able to deceive people to worship the first beast through various means that we’ll look at.

This beast is able to deceive people to worship beast number one. For example, fire comes down from heaven, and to back up, notice this language of deceiving people and getting people to worship the beast. Number one goes back not only to the first part of chapter 13 but back to chapter 12. Note that Satan was described in verse 9 of chapter 12, as the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, who leads the whole world astray, or who deceives the entire world. Now Satan’s deceptive activity is carried out by beast number one, but now specifically, among
the readers by beast number two, who is able to deceive people to follow and worship the first beast, Rome and perhaps its emperor as well.

Signs of Beast Two

There are two interesting signs that he performs, one is fire coming down from heaven. The other is he’s able to give life to an image that is created. I’m a little bit reticent to try to get too specific and literal in identifying certain events that this resembles. For example, is this a reference to magicians in first century Rome that actually do something like this? Is this an example of ventriloquism, that some would suggest that the ability to make an image appear as it could speak. It’s possible that lies behind it, but I think that these two images of fire coming down from heaven and giving the image ability to speak are once more just ways of emphasizing the deceptive power of the Roman Empire.

They probably draw on two Old Testament texts. For example, the fire coming down from heaven might call Elijah calling down fire from heaven in his conflict with Baal. Is it possible that this refers to actual signs in the Roman empire? That’s conceivable, if you remember in Exodus, the magicians were able to replicate most of the signs, miraculous plagues that Moses poured out on Egypt. But other than that, I think it’s primarily drawing on Old Testament language of fire coming down from heaven is simply meant to symbolize the ability of the Roman Empire to deceive through its power.

What about the image that can speak? More than likely the image, as we saw, the image probably goes back to another Old Testament text, to Daniel chapter 3, where Nebuchadnezzar sets up an image of himself. The image was meant to represent Nebuchadnezzar and his rule and authority over the entire kingdom. So the image here may represent the images and statues and temples that you find in most of the cities in Asia Minor as representing and reflecting the rule of Rome and the empire and the emperor throughout the empire such as in the cities of Asia Minor. But being able to give the image power to speak maybe should not be taken too literally, but once more a symbol of the power of Rome to
deceive its citizens, its inhabitants into giving allegiance and worship to Rome itself.

One other thing to note about the deceptive activity of the beast as we’ve already noted the fact that beast number two is able to deceive, recalls Satan’s deceptive activity going all the way back to creation, chapter 3 of Genesis, where he deceives Adam and Eve, and now in chapter 12 in verse 9 of Revelation, he leads the world astray or deceives the entire world. So the beast is clearly the way that Satan continues and acts out his deceptive activity in his offspring, beast number two.

The Second Beast and Chapters 2-3

However, I wonder if another important feature of the deceptive activity of the beast and this may also be one of the reasons why he is called a false prophet. When you go back to chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, the messages to the seven churches, you note that there are false teachers in a number of the churches or false prophets, prophetic figures with whom John seems to be in conflict and disagreement. These prophetic figures or false teachers whose task seems to be to deceive Christians into compromising with the Roman empire, with ungodly, oppressive, idolatrous Rome. For example, back in chapter 2, in verse 14, in the message to the church at Pergamum, he says nevertheless I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who enticed the Israelites or deceived the Israelites to sin by eating food offered/sacrificed to idols, and by committing sexual immorality. In 15 he says, “likewise you have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans,” which probably are also teaching people to compromise with pagan rule. Chapter 2, in verse 20, the message to the church Thyatira says, “Nevertheless I have this against you, you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet.”

Interesting connection to the false prophet now, she calls herself a prophet and here’s what she does. “By her teaching, she misleads or deceives my servants in the sexual immorality.” So I wonder if this is a further factor in identifying beast
number two. Not only is this the source of deception behind the Roman Empire and the emperor cult and things like this, but notice it’s important to understand the beast is able to deceive the entire world, not just Christians. The entire world is deceived but on the other hand, I wonder if there is not some connection here between the beast and those in the churches such as this woman that he calls Jezebel. Note the Nicolaitans and those who hold the teaching of Balaam who are deceiving the church, and Jezebel the prophet who is now deceiving the church in the compromising with pagan Rome and giving Rome allegiance and worship. So the false teacher, the false prophet, is going affect the readers of chapters 2 and 3 in a different way, depending on whether they are resisting or whether they are in danger of giving in to and following these false teachers. John now is showing us the true source behind this deceptive teaching and prophecy and false teaching in the church, as well as in the deceptive activity in the broader world.

Economic Sanctions and the Second Beast

Now the last thing that the beast does is, in verses 16 and 17, the beast is able to level economic sanctions, especially on God’s people, but on the entire world for refusal to give allegiance to and worship to the beast, that is Rome and its emperor. In order to engage in commerce, apparently according to these verses, it requires that they receive a mark. Now within a broader context of Revelation, the mark here that they receive on their forehead is clearly a parody to the mark or seal that the 144,000, symbolizing the entire church, the people of God, the mark that they receive on the forehead as well. So probably, the mark is meant to represent identity in belonging, whose mark you have. For example, the mark could have, literally in the first century, represented a brand or mark on a slave showing identity in belonging. In Revelation 7, the mark also seems to indicate preservation or protection as well. But whether this is an identity in belonging so that rather than this being a literally mark that these people must actually have, or some kind of literal brand that could have happened, I don’t know.

But at least in Revelation’s discourse, rather than taking this too literally,
it’s probably a symbol of identity in belonging. Those who associate with Rome, those that demonstrate their allegiance to Rome and to the emperor, are now the ones permitted to engage in commerce, permitted to buy and sell. Which we saw back in chapter 6, was not necessarily a good thing, we saw a picture of the commercial and economic life of Rome kind of turned upside down and in chaos and unbalance and even oppressive and unjust as part of God’s judgment on them. But here, they are belonging to Rome, through demonstrating their allegiance to Rome, perhaps through being involved in the emperor cult. Now this is the mark that they receive allowing them to participate in commerce. What John may have in mind in the first century would have been those who, remember in connection with a couple of the churches we talked about in Revelation chapter 2 and 3, there were those who would have been, as part of their work, would have been required to be involved in trade guilds. Often those trade guilds had patron deities, but also you would belong to them, in order to ensure success in your business, you would belong to these trade guilds. Part of belonging to them would have meant that on certain occasions you would have been required to be involved in activities that not only would have demonstrated worship and allegiance and gratitude to the god but also to the emperor. That is, by being in the trade guilds and commerce you would have been closely intertwined with the emperor cult. We’ve said numerous times that in first century Rome it was impossible to unravel the connection between commerce, politics and religion as well. So part of commerce, part of belonging to the trade guilds, part of engaging in commerce and trade and work in the first century Roman Empire and in the churches in seven cities in Asia Minor, would have meant being involved in the worship of pagan gods and also in the idolatrous emperor cult as well. So the picture here would be pressure to conform or suffer the economic consequences. Probably that’s why, for example, Smyrna is described as poor, and why Laodicea is described as wealthy. Smyrna refused to compromise with the pagan Roman Empire through their religious system of emperor worship, they refused to compromise and now are suffering the
consequences. So they are described as poor and of little reputation. Whereas Laodicea is a very wealthy city, probably indicating their willingness to compromise because of that they have become complacent as a result of that.

So the point being so far that John is unveiling is the true struggle that the churches in Asia Minor face, and that is the satanic inspired attempt of Rome to deceive God’s people by getting them to compromise by worshipping and giving allegiance to the beast and even being compromised within the context of commerce and carrying out their business and in connection with the trade guilds. Now they are being tempted to compromise by being involved in opportunities and being forced to conform to opportunities and times to show allegiance to Rome and to the beast, to the Roman Empire. Now John reminds them that behind all of this, although back to chapter 12, is Satan’s attempt to oppress and destroy God’s people. Now chapter 13 has provided them spiritual insight into the situation so that now they have the strength necessary to persevere and to endure and to resist compromising with the pagan Roman Empire.

Mark of the Beast: 666

Now we can’t leave Revelation 13 without saying something about the mark of the beast at the very end. The point especially in verse 18, this calls for wisdom. “If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, the beast number is 666, six hundred and sixty-six. But first of all, it is important to put this in broader context. Chapter 13 ends with verse 18, which is another call for discernment and insight. So this is not a call primarily for trying calculate who the beast might be or who the end time antichrist might be or how close we are to the end, that’s not the point. This language of having wisdom is in the context of the one who has an ear, let that person hear. That is, it’s a call for wisdom so that they can have true discernment and insight into their situation. Here they are called to have wisdom as to the number of this beast, which apparently is connected with his name. That’s interesting. In verse 17, the mark, is the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Now in verse 18, it’s called the number of man, or a human
number that they are to calculate, which is the number 666. But first of all we need to understand, it’s a call for discernment and wisdom into the situation so that they can respond, so that they can resist the idolatrous system of worship that they’re being forced to conform to.

First of all, we need to recognize that this reference to the name by saying that this mark that they’re going to receive is the name of the beast. This is meant intentionally to contrast with the mention of the name of God or the name that is to be written on Christians elsewhere in the book of Revelation. So for example, back in chapter 2 in verse 17 and chapter 3 in verse 12, part of the promise to the overcomers in those texts is that they will have the name of the Father or the name of the new Jerusalem written on them. Chapter 14 verse 1, “Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him, 144,000 who had his name and the Father’s name written on their foreheads.” And chapter 22 in verse 4, in the final section of the New Jerusalem vision, at the very end of the book in verse 4, describing God’s people, “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.” So the name of the beast written on those who are allowed to engage in commerce is meant as a direct contrast to other places in Revelation where a name, the name of Christ or the name of the Father, is written on the foreheads of God’s people. So that probably this should be taken symbolically again and indicating identity in belonging or allegiance and association with, depending on whose name one bears.

But what is this 666 that the name is identified with? Part of the difficulty, part of the reason why they are called to discern this situation, I wonder if it doesn’t have to do with because the beast acts deceptively, because of the deceptive nature of the beast’s activity, it calls for insight and discernment on the part of the readers. So now they are called upon to have wisdom, that is, because of the deceptive nature of idolatry, because of what is at stake. It requires that they have wisdom and insight and discernment into the situation in order to resist it and in order not to be sucked into it and to conform.
But what is this number 666? There’s a number of things we could say about this text, but I want to focus on what seems to occupy most people’s attentions and that is, the number 666. Probably, according to most people, this reflects the common notion in the first century of what is called gematria. That was an ancient practice that associated the letters of the alphabet with numbers. What would happen is you would take a person’s name or the name of something, take the numerical value of each of the letters that would have been understood and assumed, and add all of them up to come up with a number. Therefore the number would be sort of a code or indication of the name. And there are plenty of examples of this. For example, the name Jesus in Greek, Ἰησοῦς, in Greek if you take the numerical, the assumed numerical values of each of the letters of Jesus, Ἰησοῦς in Greek, it adds up to 888 or eight hundred and eighty-eight. Some have even said that provides what’s going on here. The beast, 666, is meant to be sort of a parody of Jesus’ name, 888. That’s possible. But it’s intriguing that the author’s call for wisdom has usually been ignored here and so that 666 has been subject to all kinds of speculation. Sometimes the number 666 has been associated with historical individuals. For example, in the United States of America, the number 666 has often been associated with presidents themselves. Outside of the United States, the number 666 has been associated with other evil rulers such as Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler or even the pope at times, in the Reformation. 666 has been used to associate with certain popes in the Roman Catholic Church.

But other attempts have been made to associate 666 with modern day technology. I’ve seen personally, since I’ve been paying attention to it, and there could be other examples of it, but personally I’ve seen examples of 666 go from indicating barcodes on items that you purchase two credit cards to computer chips that people think will one day be embedded in our forearms or our skulls to keep track of us and things like that.

Also, you frequently see the number 666 motivating the way people act, almost sometimes rashly. For example, I know of people who have intentionally
return license plates, even though it’s cost them more money, they’ve returned license plates because it had the number 666 on them. Or they’ve had their phone number changed because it had 666. I know of one person who refused to pay a bill because it came back as $6.66. And so the number 666 influences and plays a role in the way we look at things, and how we even interpret reality.

But I want you to remember two important principles. First of all, from our discussion of the literary genre of Revelation and the hermeneutical principles that flow from that. First of all, is would John’s readers have been able to make sense of this? I’m convinced that John’s readers, for them, this was not a mystery, it was a call for wisdom, and this call to calculate the number is something they could have done. So, the problem is 2000 years later, we are the ones in the dark and we try to scramble to make sense of this. But first of all, John’s readers would have and could have made sense of this.

And second, related to that, is one of the most important hermeneutical principles that we saw, that for any interpretation of Revelation to be plausible and compelling, must be something that John could have understood and that his readers could have understood, or John could have intended and his readers living in the first century Greco-Roman Empire, in a pre-technological, pre-consumer age, pre-modern day warfare age, pre-nuclear age, something that they could have understood and would have made sense of. In my mind that rules out a lot of the possible explanations of 666 that have been proposed down through the centuries. Especially today, particularly those that associate with modern technological features of our day, our modern methods of warfare, and things like barcodes and computers and things like that. That principle rules those kinds of explanations out immediately.

It’s interesting that this is described as the number of a man, there’s a little bit of difficulty here. Does this mean a human number? Even then I’m not sure what that would mean, what would be a human number as opposed to an angelic number or something like that. We could take it as the number of a man, that is in
reference to a person. Verse 17 could certainly lend itself to that, when he says, no one can buy and sell unless he received the mark, which is the name of the beast, or the number of his name. So verse 17 almost suggests or requires that the number have some reference or relationship to the beast itself.

666 as Nero

Because of this, it simply raises the question, what person might that be? Because of this, by far the most common explanation is that the beast number is to be associated with the name of Nero, that’s the most common explanation. And this would certainly make sense, this is not suggesting that Revelation was written back then in the time of Nero. It may simply mean that given the nature of Nero’s reign and the evil that is often associated with him, even outside of Christians’ attitude toward him in the first century, Nero would have become almost a model for or almost a type of evil and the evil emperor to come, or any other emperor. So that by using 666 as reference to Nero, the idea is not that the author is referring literally to Nero, but that almost the spirit, the evil of Nero, is now once again embodied in the Roman emperor that now the first century Christians face at the time John is writing. So the same godless, evil spirit that embodied Nero and this emperor, Nero being a model for evil, now is resident in and surfaces in the present emperor, which would be Domitian if the most common view of the date of Revelation is accepted.

The problem though, comes with linking Nero’s name exactly with 666, and as most realize, it really can’t be done with Greek. But so that most have attempted to associate Nero’s name with the way it would have been spelled in Hebrew. But even there, there’s a problem because Nero’s name, even in Hebrew, can only add up to 666 if it is spelled in a rather rare way, if it’s not spelled in the common way. That is, do you see where I’m going? The only way to connect Nero in Greek with 666 is to assume that it’s reflecting the spelling of Nero and not just Nero, Nero Caesar in Hebrew and then a rather rare spelling at that. So the problem is you’d have to assume, that’s the only way you’d get to 666 then. So
that problem is you’d have to assume two things. Number one, that the readers, many of them, would have understood Hebrew. Number two, that they would’ve been familiar with a rather rare spelling of the name of Nero Caesar in Hebrew. Because of that, many have looked for other explanations, but I would suggest, it’s still possible, particularly because the link between the mark and the number and the name of the emperor in verse 17. So it is possible that John is alluding to Nero’s name, again, as a model of evil that now is surfacing again in the Roman empire ruling as he writes.

Another possibility is to see the number 666, as the number of a human, that is a human number, or one short of the perfect number 7. So 666 would be one short of the perfect number 777. So this would be the number of sinful, fallen, godless, idolatrous humanity, now embodied in the human ruler Domitian, who is now portrayed as an imperfect, evil, idolatrous and deceptive human being that falls short of the perfect number 7. So that then this is the author’s way of trying to get the readers to discern the true nature of Rome and its emperor by seeing it as a godless, idolatrous, another way of emphasizing the godless, idolatrous nature of the Roman Empire and its emperor by perhaps linking him with Nero but now portraying him as his name falls short of the perfect number 7. He instead embodies imperfection and evil and idolatry and by discerning who it is that embodies this. Now Christians will be better able to resist and to not be deceived by the godless, idolatrous practices of the Roman empire.

Conclusion on Rev 12 and 13

So chapters 12 and 13 bring us to the end of the very important section that, in true apocalyptic fashion, is unveiling not only the true nature of Rome, Rome is this hideous beast that is satanically inspired, and embodies evil, idolatry, oppression and godlessness from previous generations and empires, now malfeasant in Rome. It also spells out for Christians, the true source of their struggle. In Pauline language, their struggle is not just with flesh and blood, but their struggle is with the authority and the ruler of the heavenly realms, who is
Satan himself. Now armed with this new perspective and knowledge, God’s people are now able to perceive in see their situation in a new light. To get those Christians that are compromising to wake up and resist, to realize what it is they are in danger of doing, but to get those Christians who are suffering and even being persecuted, to get them to persevere and to endure and to remain and to retain their faithful witness, no matter what the consequences.

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