



Catalog No. 1522

Revelation 13:11-18

22nd Message

Bernard Bell

August 7th, 2005

THE GREAT DECEPTION

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

We live in a world of numbers. We start collecting them as soon as we are born: date of birth, hospital chart number, Social Security Number. We continue to collect them as we go through life: driver's license number, numbers for bank accounts and credit card accounts, telephone numbers aplenty, customer numbers for all sorts of businesses, PINs and passwords galore, even IP addresses. In one way or another these numbers define and identify us. Of all the numbers ever issued, one is famous above all others: that issued by John to the beast. His number is 666. No number has ever attracted as much attention as this one. No verse in Revelation has received as much attention as 13:18 in which this number is given. People who know nothing else about Revelation know that it contains the number 666. Today we will try to make sense of this number, how it identifies and characterizes the beast, and what it means for us today.

It is vital that we pay attention to the context of the number. Chapters 12 and 13 belong together. In these chapters John is shown a series of visions which unveil deep realities about the present state of the world. Every generation has sought to make sense of the world. Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why is the world the way it is? How will it all end? Peoples of the ancient world developed myths to explain the world. Their myths were expressions of their understanding of the cosmos. Among the creatures populating the myths of the Ancient Near East were two fearsome monsters which threatened to plunge the ordered world into chaos: a sea-monster and a land-monster. These monsters reflected a profound unease over the cosmos: would order prevail or would the world sink into chaos? These two monsters make an occasional appearance in the Bible as the sea-monster Leviathan and the land-monster Behemoth. God draws them to Job's attention:

"Look at behemoth...

**Can anyone capture him by the eyes,
or trap him and pierce his nose?**

Can you pull in leviathan with a fishhook...

**Can you make a pet of him like a bird
or put him on a leash for your girls?" (Job 40:15b, 24; 41:1, 5)**

Some interpret leviathan and behemoth as the crocodile and the hippopotamus. But it is clear that the two beasts are much more terrifying than those animals. The whole point of God's argument is that these are monsters who appear totally beyond Job's control. But God shows that they are under his control.

All is not right in the world. There is evil, and there is an evil one, Satan, who lies behind the evil. We are never told the origins of Satan or of evil. What we are told is that God is sovereign over Satan and evil, and that he will eventually banish both from his world. Knowing what God is doing about evil is far more important than knowing where evil comes from.

In chapter 12 we learned that Satan has been repeatedly thwarted in his attacks upon God's kingdom. He has failed to prevent the installation of the Messiah as King; he has failed to retain his place as

Accuser in God's court; he has failed to devour the Church. But God allows him to go after the individual saints, and he allows him to call up two assistants. John casts these assistants as the two monsters: the sea-monster Leviathan and the land-monster Behemoth. He shows two ways in which the dragon Satan seeks to destroy the saints: the way of the sea-beast, and the way of the land-beast. The way of the sea-beast is the way of raw power, of tyrannical rule. John calls the saints to respond with faithful endurance. They are not to return evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good.

Today we'll look at the second way that Satan seeks to destroy the saints: the way of the land-beast, the false prophet. We'll find that it's much more dangerous because it's the way of deception.

A. The Second Beast (13:11-15)

Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. (13:11-15 NIV)

The second beast arises from the earth, dressed as the mythical land-monster Behemoth, threatening to overwhelm the order of God's kingdom with chaos.

The first beast has seemingly unlimited power and authority, as indicated by his ten horns, seven heads and ten crowns. This great power and authority is granted also to the second beast to use on behalf of the first beast. His function with respect to the first beast is that of a prophet. This is made explicit later in the book when he is called a prophet. He exercises similar power and authority to that exercised by the great prophets of the Old Testament. Like Moses, he can perform great and miraculous signs. Like Elijah and Elisha, he can call down fire from heaven. These authenticate his ministry, so that the world responds to his message.

His prophetic ministry has a single purpose: to lead the whole world into worshiping the first beast. To that end he orchestrates the erection of an image in honor of the beast. He is even able to breathe life into this image so that it can speak. Failure to worship before this image is a capital offense.

The second beast is very successful in his ministry, but it is all a deceptive charade. Everything he is and does is deceptive. His very

appearance is deceptive. He looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. He looks innocent, but his every word is Satanic.

The prophet is deceitful because that's the *modus operandi* of Satan and therefore of all his agents. Paul saw through all the subterfuge of his opponents in Corinth, whom he labeled as deceitful false prophets. He was not surprised at such deception: "no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade" (2 Cor 11:14-15). Jesus said of Satan, "there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

Because the second beast is deceptive, he is later called not simply the prophet, but the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). He is a counterfeit of the true prophets. In Revelation the prophets are not a select few of God's people. John considers all the saints to be prophets. He calls them to hold fast to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. This is their prophetic witness to the world. That it is the one enthroned in heaven and the Lamb enthroned beside him who are worthy of worship. The testimony of the false prophet is that it is the beast who is worthy of worship. The true prophet par excellence is Jesus Christ himself. His very names include Faithful and True (19:11). He is the forerunner of the saints, blazing the trail for them to follow. He bore faithful witness to God, for which he was killed, but he was raised to new life. The whole book is a prophecy. This doesn't mean that it gives us detailed timetables for the future. It is a proclamation from God to his people, a revelation of Jesus Christ.

It is not only the second beast who is deceptive; the first beast is also deceptive. Three times in chapter 13 we are told that the beast has a fatal wound from which he has recovered (13:3, 12, 14). Whether we take this miraculous recovery as Nero's return, or the recovery of the Roman Empire after the chaotic year following Nero's death, or the phoenix-like ability of a new beastly empire to arise on the ashes of the previous fallen one, one thing is clear: the first beast is a counterfeit of the Lamb. John saw one of the beast's heads "as slain" to death (13:3), yet the beast "lived" (13:14). Previously John had seen the Lamb standing in heaven "as slain" (5:6), the Lamb who died and yet "lived" (2:8). As the counterfeit of the Lamb, the beast is the antichrist.

The true prophets proclaim that it is Christ who is Lord, who is worthy of worship. The false prophet proclaims that it is the beast who is Lord, who is worthy of worship. The false prophet's tool is deception. He deceives the inhabitants of the world by getting them to look only at the visible realities in the world.

Revelation is a revelation because it opens our eyes to the unseen realities. It is supremely the revelation of Jesus Christ, the revelation of who he is and also the revelation which he gives to his servants, the saints. Our eyes are lifted above the earthly plane, above all earthly powers to see God enthroned in heaven above, before whom all cry, "Thou art worthy." Our eyes are lifted above all earthly tyrannical rule and beastly behavior to see the slain Lamb, also enthroned in heaven, before whom all cry, "Thou art worthy."

Everyone in Revelation worships, everyone that is except for the two trinities: the true heavenly Trinity of God, Lamb and seven-fold Spirit, and the counterfeit infernal trinity of dragon, beast and false prophet. Apart from these six there is no one in the book who does not worship. The inhabitants of the earth worship the dragon and the beast. The dwellers in heaven, and those who are on pilgrimage to that dwelling-place, worship God and the Lamb.

I think the first readers of Revelation, living in Asia at the end of the first century, would have had no difficulty identifying the two beasts in their world. The first beast was the Roman Empire or the Roman Emperor; they would not have distinguished the two: the Emperor was the Empire. The emperor was the world ruler, acclaimed and worshiped as divine. The second beast was the imperial cult, dedicated to the worship of the emperor. Some try to be more specific, suggesting the second beast represented the officialdom of the Asian cities who competed with one another for the honor of building temples to the emperor, or the empire-wide priesthood of the imperial cult. I don't see the need to be that specific. The second beast is the system which promoted and enforced the cult of the emperor. It might be helpful to think of it as a vast propaganda machine. Failure to comply was costly. Two weeks ago we saw that Pliny, governor of Bithynia just fifteen years after Revelation was written, was killing Christians for their refusal to worship the Emperor. Forty years after that, Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of John of Ephesus, was martyred for the same reason.

This was not new. This had happened before in the Old Testament. In the time of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar had set up a huge image of himself, and issued a proclamation that all should worship the image. Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to do so (Dan 3).

Sadly, deception had infiltrated the church at the end of the first century. False prophets were at work in the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira under the guise of the prophetess Jezebel and the teaching of Balaam, the prophet who sought to lead Israel astray (Num 22-24). In both churches it was the same two issues: the eating of food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. The former involved participation in idolatrous practices in the temples; the latter is a metaphor for idolatry. In both cases, false prophets were teaching the churches that it was OK to compromise. The churches could thus enjoy an easier life.

None of this should have been a surprise to the early Church. Jesus warned his disciples to beware of false prophets who would come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly be ferocious wolves (Matt 7:15); they would even be able to perform great signs and miracles (Matt 24:24).

That's all well and good, but what does this mean for us today? The Roman Empire is long since gone. Just as there is more to the first beast than Rome, so there is more to the second beast than the Roman imperial cult. The beast was Rome, Rome is dead, but the beast is alive and well. The false prophet was the Roman imperial cult, that cult is dead, but the false prophet is alive and well. To understand the deeper significance of the two beasts we need to understand the mark, name and number of the beast.

B. The Mark of the Beast and 666 (13:16-18)

He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666. (13:16-18)

The second beast forces all the inhabitants of the earth, regardless of social standing, to receive on their forehead or right hand the

mark of the beast, which is the same as his name or the number of his name.

Three things are here equated: the mark, the name, and the number of the name. Suggestions abound for all three.

1. The Mark of the Beast

The mark of the beast is placed upon the forehead or right hand of every person. What is this mark? Is it Gorbachev's birthmark? Is it a tattoo or brand on the forehead? The most popular current suggestion is that it is a RFID microchip implanted under the skin.

I don't think it's very difficult to figure out the mark if we just pay attention to the whole book. Just as everyone in Revelation worships, so everyone has something on their forehead. In the very next verse (14:1) John sees the heavenly saints with the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. Elsewhere this is called the seal of God. Yet no one speculates as to what this seal looks like!

Just as John is careful to use two different verbs for those who inhabit the earth and those who dwell in heaven, so he is careful to use two different words for what is on the forehead. On their foreheads the saints carry the seal of God, while the inhabitants of the earth carry the mark of the beast. There is no one who is not covered. The seal represents protection from judgment (7:3). The mark implies the opposite: destined for judgment. Above all, the mark and seal indicate ownership and belonging. In the binary, black and white world of Revelation, everyone belongs to one of two kingdoms: you belong to God or to the dragon, to the Lamb or to the beast. There's no middle ground.

2. The Name and Number of the Beast

John suggests a tight connection between the name and number of the beast. The number of the beast is the number of his name. It is also the number of man or the number of a man. The number is 666. I'm sure that there are more than 666 suggestions of the meaning of the number. There are two approaches to figuring out this number.

The first approach is to view the number 666 as somehow encoded within the mark of the beast. Perhaps 666 is integrated into one's Social Security Number which is then tattooed onto one's forehead. Perhaps it's part of a UPC code branded onto the forehead. A few years ago there was a widespread scare that 666 was encoded into every UPC label; this turned out to be completely unfounded.

The other approach to the number 666 is to find a single individual on whom to hang the label. Is it Ronald Wilson Reagan, each of whose three names contains six letters? Probably the most popular target of the last 500 years has been the pope. If you take one of the pope's supposed titles, *vicarius filii dei* (vicar of the son of God), and count only those letters that the Romans used for numbers (since the title is in Latin), remembering that first-century Latin used V where ecclesiastical Latin uses U, you do indeed obtain 666 (VICarIVs fILII DeI). But there are multiple problems with this, not least of which is that *vicarius filii dei* is not a papal title; he is *Vicarius Christi* (vicar of Christ), which does not add up to 666. Furthermore, applying the same rules to CVte pVrPLe DIInosaVr, you can prove that Barney is the beast.¹

The problem with so many suggestions is that people already know who they want the beast to be, then try to prove it. Consider this means of identifying Hitler as the beast, from the website revelation13.net: "if you take the cosine of Hitler's birthplace coordinate of 48.25 N you have .666."²

John didn't give the number 666 in order to fuel 2000 years of wild speculation. He gave the number in the context of pastoral counsel. Note the similarity between verses 10 and 18. After writing about the first beast, John concludes, "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (13:10). How are the saints to respond to the brutal tyranny of the beast, the world ruler? With patient endurance and faithfulness, neither following the beast nor responding in a beastly manner. After writing about the second beast, John concludes, "This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast" (13:18). How are the saints to respond to the deception of the false prophet? With wisdom, using insight to calculate the beast's number. So the number of the beast has to make pastoral sense to Christians living at the end of the first century. Beyond that, it has to make pastoral sense to us today.

John says that the one with insight is to calculate the number of the beast. In the ancient world numbers had both symbolic and gematric value.

Most of us are familiar with the symbolic value of certain Biblical numbers: 7 represents perfection, 10 completion, 12 the people of God, 40 a period of testing, and so on.

Numbers also had meaning in gematria. Though the characters of the Western alphabet are the Roman alphabetic characters, our numerals come from the Arabic world. The Romans, like the Greeks and Hebrews, had no separate symbols for numbers; instead, they used alphabetic characters. Both the Hebrews and the Greeks used the same method, using successive letters of the alphabet for the first ten numbers, then increasing by tens up to 100, then increasing by hundreds. Gematria is the practice of counting the numeric value of a word.

There is near-universal agreement that John expects the saints to use gematria to calculate the number of the beast's name. Furthermore, the puzzle should be understandable. Who are the ones with wisdom and insight? Context requires that they be all the faithful saints. If you're a faithful saint, you should be able to calculate the number. The problem is that we're given the number, not the name. It's easy to calculate the number from the name for there is a single solution, but very difficult to calculate the name from the number from there are multiple solutions.

I think the most convincing solution, which has widespread support, is Nero Caesar transliterated into Hebrew. Furthermore, the Greek word for beast, when transliterated into Hebrew, also yields 666.

The name Nero Caesar fits well for an audience at the end of the first century. Though Nero had been dead for nearly thirty years, his spirit was alive and well in Domitian. Nero was an antichrist. He was the first Roman emperor to engage in a systematic persecution of Christians, though one that was restricted to Rome. Both Peter and Paul were killed under Nero's assaults. Though previous emperors had been declared divine on their death, Nero claimed divinity while he yet lived. He styled himself as the Greek god Apollo, slayer of Python, the dragon figure of Greek mythology. Two decades later, Domitian ruled in the model of Nero. He claimed divinity, calling on people to worship him as "Our Lord and God." In Ephesus a large temple was built to him, where he was worshiped. In the first instance, then, I think the number 666 refers to Nero Caesar. John encourages the saints to remain steadfast in their affirmation that it is Christ, not Caesar, who is Lord.

This is all well and good for an audience at the end of the first century. But Nero and Domitian are long dead. The Roman Empire is long dead. Does the number of the beast have any pastoral significance for us today? Indeed it does. Not only does the number 666 have gematric meaning, it also has symbolic meaning. Six is one less than the perfect number 7. It is the number of incompleteness and chaos; it is the number of man, who falls short of perfection.

The three-fold 666 therefore means a three-fold falling short of perfection. This interpretation fits well with a major thrust of this chapter, that the two beasts are counterfeit. The first beast has set himself up as the universal ruler, before whom every knee should bow. The second beast ensures that this is what happens, using powerful propaganda to orchestrate this worship of the beast. But it's all counterfeit. The beast is not worthy to be worshiped, for he is less than perfect. The false prophet's propaganda is all deception. The beast awes the world into worship through fear. The false prophet achieves the same end through deception. Brute fear-inducing force and subtle deception: these are Satan's two tools in his pursuit of the saints, his attempt to get them to forsake Christ and return to his infernal kingdom.

The number 666 shows us that this is all a smoke and mirrors act. The dragon and the two beasts might seem to have all the power, but it's all a sham. Like Toto pulling back the curtain to reveal the little man behind the powerful voice of the wizard of Oz, so John pulls back the veil to show us the unseen realities behind the visible appearances. He does so to encourage us to remain true to Christ.

The beast is antichrist, the one who sets himself up as Christ. His number is 666. In the late first century the expression of antichrist was Nero followed by Domitian. Nero and Domitian are both dead, but antichrist keeps rearing his head. He is a counterfeit of the true Christ. The name of Jesus adds up to 888, one better than perfection. The two are opposed: antichrist, 666, one less than 7, and Jesus, 888, one more than 7.

The world is deceived into worshipping the wrong person. We were once all enmeshed in this deceptive tangle. As Paul wrote in our Scripture reading, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." But, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Therefore, said Paul, we proclaim "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:4-6).

Revelation is a book about worship. Everyone worships. It's not a matter of whether or not you worship, but whom you worship. Revelation portrays a black and white world, dividing humanity into two sets of people. One people inhabits the earth where its city is Babylon, it worships the dragon and the beast, and it bears the mark of the beast. The other people dwells in heaven where its city is the New Jerusalem, it worships God and the Lamb, and it bears God's seal. There are only these two sets of people.

Revelation is sent to the churches at the end of the first century to remind them of this, to clarify their vision, to encourage the saints to remain true to the kingdom to which they belong, and to chastise the saints who have been deceived into lessening their witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a book of both comfort and rebuke. Comfort for those who are suffering at the hands of the beast for their refusal to worship the beast. Rebuke for those who are not suffering because they have compromised their witness.

C. Resisting deception

We don't face tyrannical rule by Caesar or antichrist today. But we are all open to this Satanic deception to worship the wrong person or the wrong things. How do we resist Satan's deception today? Two things that we are doing this morning enable us to resist his deception.

1. Worship

We are gathered for worship. Throughout this past week our minds have been preoccupied with many things. One way or another, subtly or not so subtly, we have taken our eyes off the Lord. We gather to remind ourselves of who we are and who we follow. We reorient ourselves onto the heavenly throne, where we see God sovereign over all, and we see the Lord Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb. Because our vision gets cloudy, it is vital that we gather for worship and remind ourselves of these otherwise unseen realities.

2. Communion

In a few minutes we will come to the Lord's Table to engage in a deeply symbolic act. The early church, from the very beginning, celebrated the eucharist whenever it met. This was a profoundly subversive act in the first century. The believers were saying that their source of life and salvation was not Rome nor the Emperor, but the Lord Jesus Christ. As we come to the communion table we remind ourselves that our source of life and salvation is not Silicon Valley, our stock options, our job, our family, our dreams, but the Lord Jesus Christ, slain for us. We nourish ourselves afresh on him and reorient ourselves. Having reoriented and nourished ourselves, we go out into the world with a different outlook on how this world works.

Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.

1. Craig Keener, *Revelation* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 359.

2. T. Chase, "Revelation 13: Adolph Hitler, Predecessor to the Antichrist—a Bible prophecy and New Age analysis." Online: www.revelation13.net/hitler.html.