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 Revelation 17:8-17  
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## BUT WE SEE JESUS

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” said Lord Acton. Despite the West’s efforts to foster democracy, the world still has plenty of absolute rulers, rulers corrupted by power. Even democratic nations find that their leaders are not immune to the corruption of power. Can great power, even absolute power, ever be used for good?

We continue our study of Revelation 17, in which John is shown God’s judgment upon the great harlot. An angel has invited John to witness this judgment: “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute” (17:1). Carried away in the Spirit into a desert, John saw “a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns” (17:3). In response to John’s astonishment at this vision, the angel replied, “Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns” (17:7). His explanation of the woman is very brief: she is the great city (17:18). Today we turn to his much longer explanation of the beast (17:8-17).

Few passages of Revelation have aroused as much scrutiny and created as much confusion as this one, so it is with trepidation that I launch into these ten verses. Three features of the vision need interpretation: the beast, his seven heads, and his ten horns. Each has been interpreted in numerous ways.

### A. The Beast (17:8-9a)

**“The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.**

**“This calls for a mind with wisdom.” (Rev 17:8-9a NIV)**

John has seen the beast before, in chapter 13, where he saw arising from the sea a beast with “ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name” (13:1). What or who is this beast? As usual, John’s imagery is drawn from the Old Testament, in this case from Daniel 7.

In that chapter Daniel saw four beasts arise from the sea: the first like a winged lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard with four wings and four heads, and the fourth a ten-horned monster that was unlike the other beasts, indeed unlike anything Daniel had ever seen so “terrifying and frightening and very powerful” was it (Dan 7:1-7). An angel explained to Daniel that these “four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth” (Dan 7:17).

The beast seen by John is a composite of these four beasts, all four beasts rolled into one. The four beasts between them had seven heads and ten horns. The heads represent authority, the horns represent power. Seven and ten are symbolic of completeness. This beast has absolute power and authority which he has received from the drag-

on, Satan (13:4). The beast is the tyrant king, ruler of the world, set up by Satan in opposition to God and his kingdom. John’s readers at the end of the first century would have had no difficulty recognizing this beast. He was the Roman emperor. Rome was the superpower of the day, the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. Her emperor was the world ruler, the most powerful man the world had ever seen. But the beast was more than just Rome. Rome was only the current manifestation of the beast, but the beast is far more enduring than Rome.

The beast is covered with blasphemous names. In Daniel’s vision, an additional horn arose among the ten horns on the fourth beast. This horn had “a mouth that spoke boastfully,” literally “a mouth that spoke great things” (Dan 7:8).

Earlier in Daniel we are given several narrative illustrations of the sorts of great things that tyrants say about themselves. It was blasphemy for Nebuchadnezzar to set up an image, calling on all to fall down and worship it (Dan 3). He uttered great things, boastful things, when he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan 4:30). It was blasphemy when Belshazzar, drinking from goblets taken from the temple in Jerusalem, “praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone” (Dan 5:4).

The book of Daniel is a warning to earthly kings and a comfort to God’s people. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that though he might be called “king of kings” on earth (Dan 2:37), there was yet a higher king. When Daniel first related and then interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream, the king acknowledged, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings” (Dan 2:47). When God delivered Daniel’s three friends from the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship the image, Nebuchadnezzar acclaimed, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God...no other god can save in this way” (Dan 3:28-29). After boasting of his self-built city, Nebuchadnezzar was brought low until he acknowledged “that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” (Dan 4:32). When he came to his senses he wrote a letter to the entire world, telling them what happened: “I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation... Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (Dan 4:34, 37).

Nebuchadnezzar learnt his lesson, but his successor Belshazzar did not. When he was uttering those blasphemous words during his feast, handwriting appeared on the wall announcing his doom. Daniel chastised him for failing to heed the example of Nebuchadnezzar:

“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven...you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (Dan 5:22-23)

This is the background to the beasts of Daniel 7, and to the beast of Revelation. Both Daniel and Revelation are about kings, kingdoms and worship. Who is the true sovereign: a mere mortal or God? Whose kingdom is everlasting: the kingdom of man or the kingdom of God? Who is fit to be worshiped: the earthly king, gods made by human hands, or the God of heaven?

Now a few centuries later, the Roman emperors were claiming great titles for themselves: *augustus* (worshipful), *dominus* (lord), *divus* (divine), *deus* (God), *pontifex maximus* (high priest, chief bridge-builder between earth and heaven), *princeps* (first citizen). But such blasphemous titles were not the sole prerogative of the Roman emperors. Every beastly ruler speaks boastfully, speaks great things of himself, claims blasphemous titles, sets himself up against God.

But there is more to the beast. He is not just anti-God, he is also a counterfeit Christ. In chapter 13, the beast is described three times as having recovered from a fatal wound (13:3, 12, 14). John saw that one of his heads was “as slain unto death” (13:3) and yet the beast lives (13:14). In this he mimics the Lamb whom John sees standing in heaven “as slain” (5:6), yet this Lamb lives (2:8). The beast, in his seeming death and resurrection, is a counterfeit of the Lamb.

In chapter 17, John uses a different expression three times to describe the beast. He “once was, now is not, and will come up” (17:8), “he once was, now is not, and yet will come” (17:8), and he “once was, and now is not” (17:11). In this he is a parody of God “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4, 8; 4:8; cf. 11:17; 16:5). God alone is the eternal one. He is the one “who lives for ever and ever” (4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7). The beast, though he seems to have consolidated all power and authority into his hands, is not eternal. His current status is described as “now is not.” How can this be? In the visible realm, the earthly realm, the beast seems to have total power and authority. But in the unseen realm, the heavenly realm, the spiritual realm, we see that his power is broken.

The beast will come again. However, John is careful not to use the same verb that he uses for God’s “coming.” When God comes it will be from heaven in judgment: judgment upon the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the woman and all who are under their sway; judgment that completes the salvation of his people. It is also not the same word that he uses for the coming of Jesus. Ten times in the book Jesus says, “I am coming”: seven times with one verb, three times with another. When Jesus comes, he too will come from heaven. He too will come in judgment and salvation: judgment on his enemies and salvation for his people. But the beast does not have this power. When he comes, he will merely be present (17:8b) en route to his own judgment.

“The inhabitants of the earth” see the phoenix-like nature of the beast, and are astonished, just as in chapter 13 they saw the beast recovered from his mortal wound and were astonished and worshiped the dragon and the beast. These are the earth-dwellers, who live away from God’s presence, whose horizon is earth-bound. Since their vision is restricted to earth, they worship what on earth appears to be supreme: the seven-headed, ten-horned beast.

But John tells the saints, “This calls for a mind with wisdom” (17:9). Though most English translations place a paragraph break before verse 9, this call belongs with verse 8, as its parallels make

clear. John isn’t telling the saints that they need wisdom to figure out that the seven heads are seven hills. He’s telling them that they need wisdom concerning the beast and the worshiping response of the earth-dwellers. What are the saints to see that the inhabitants of the earth don’t see?

Four times John uses a similar construction: twice he writes, “This calls for a mind with wisdom” (13:18; 17:9); twice he writes, “This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints” (13:10; 14:12). Each time John issues this admonition in response to the worship of the beast. The earth-dwellers worship the beast: they are astonished at the beast’s seeming immortality, his ability to recover from his fatal wound, and they are deceived by the false prophet. But the saints are to look on this with a mind of wisdom. The earth-dwellers are worshiping the wrong one; they have been deceived into worshiping an imposter. The saints worship God and the Lamb. They will suffer for this, and so they are called to endure.

The saints have a wider horizon; they see what the earth-dwellers don’t see. They see whence the beast comes and whither he goes. They see that the beast is constantly arising from the Abyss and going to his destruction (17:8, 11). They therefore refuse to be astonished at the beast and refuse to give him their worship. Given his origin and his destination he is unfit to be worshiped. They also endure, because they know his doom is sure. The Abyss is the home of all that is demonic, Satan’s lair, the antipode of heaven. Its ruler is Abaddon (Hebrew) or Apollyon (Greek), both meaning Destroyer (9:11). Since it is Satan the Destroyer who has put the beast on his throne, the beast is hell-bent on the destruction of God’s kingdom. But in truth he is on the fast-track to destruction himself. To the earth-bound eye it doesn’t seem like he is headed for destruction, but the eye of faith sees what the physical eye cannot see.

So much, then, for the beast. What of his seven heads and ten horns? This is why people are really interested in this chapter!

## B. The Seven Heads (17:9b-11)

**“The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.” (17:9b-11)**

The beast’s seven heads are “seven hills on which the woman sits.” Everyone knows that Rome is the city built on seven hills; it has been known as such since the sixth century BC.

So far so good.

The angel identifies the seven heads as being also seven kings. Of these seven, five have fallen, the sixth is, the seventh is not yet come. Furthermore, when the beast returns he will be an eighth, but will also be one of the seven. Who are these seven kings? Who are the fifth, the sixth, the seventh and the eighth? There has been much speculation on this.

Most people focus their attention on the first twelve Caesars, from Julius Caesar through Domitian. Seutonius, who wrote his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* in the early second century, already recognized these twelve as a set. But how should one count them to arrive at the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth? Should one start with Julius, the first Caesar and progenitor of the first dynasty, but not himself an emperor, or with Augustus, the first emperor? Should one include Galba, Otho and Vitellius, the three short-lived emperors of the Year of the

Four Emperors? Should one count only the emperors who were deified by the Senate or who claimed divinity? Should one count Nero twice, in accord with the legend that instead of committing suicide he had gone into hiding in the east, whence he would return?

If this makes your head spin, you're in good company. As so often, George Caird speaks sense into this muddle:

Since our problems are not due to any lack of historical information, there is no reason to think that John's first-century readers would have been in any better case than we... John did not arrive at the number seven by counting emperors; the monster Leviathan had seven heads centuries before the founding of Rome... the seven kings are a symbolic number, representative of the whole series of emperors, and they would remain seven no matter how long the actual list happened to be.<sup>1</sup>

The seven kings represent the whole series of Roman emperors. They also represent the whole series of tyrant-led empires that have set themselves up against God.

If these seven kings are not restricted to Rome, what of the seven hills? Might they be more than just Rome? Hills or mountains are also symbolic of power or rule. Seven kings on seven hills well portray the totality of the beast's rule.

But there is good news. This series of tyrants who oppose God and his people is almost at an end: five of seven have already fallen. The present ruler doesn't actually have much power because currently the beast "is not." There is one ruler yet to come, but his rule will be only momentary. The beast will make one last grab for power, but he's going to destruction. Of course, this calls for a mind with wisdom. This calls for the eye of faith. To the earth-dwellers, the current king, the sixth, is all-powerful, and so is the beast. "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" they asked (13:4). But the mind with wisdom sees through the beast.

### C. The Ten Horns (17:12-14)

"The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." (17:12-14)

The seven heads are kings, most of whom have come and gone. The ten horns are also kings, but ones who are yet to receive rule. Those interpreters who look to ancient Rome for seven actual rulers, here look to modern Europe for ten actual rulers waiting in the wings. The prime candidate for the past few decades has been what is now the European Union. When the EEC expanded to nine members in 1973 there was great speculation that once it grew by one more member it would become this confederation of ten kings. But for five years (1981-86) the world survived a ten-nation European Community without the end arriving! Though EU membership now stands at 25 and is about to expand to 27, there are still prophecy experts who look for a ten-member Europe.

But I suggest that just as we would be wrong to look back for seven specific historical figures who were the seven heads, so we would be wrong to look ahead for ten specific historical figures to be the ten horns. Horns are symbolic of power. There are ten of them because

they seem to have all power, power which the dragon will give them just as he has given power to the beast.

Because they are Satanic they have only one purpose: to support the beast in making war against the Lamb. Several times in the book we see this assault of evil upon God and his kingdom (16:14, 16; 17:14; 19:19; 20:7-9). From an earthly point of view the dragon and the beast with their seven heads and ten horns seem all-powerful. But, but, but! "[B]ut the Lamb will overcome them because he is King of kings and Lord of lords" (17:14; cf. 19:20; 20:9-10). It's no contest. The rule of the ten kings is only momentary. The beast is defeated.

The Lamb wins because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. This is a title used properly of God in the Old Testament. He allows only one other to bear the title: his own Son, who has done the exact opposite of the beast. The beast grasped for power and authority that was not his. The Son laid aside the power and authority that was his (Phil 2:8-11). This Jesus, the slain Lamb, God has raised to life, and has enthroned on his mountain, Mount Zion, as King of kings and Lord of lords.

There with the Lamb is his army, "his called, chosen and faithful followers" (17:14). The saints are involved in this victory, too. Their only weapon is their faithful witness to Jesus the slain but risen Lamb. But that was also the Lamb's weapon, for he was the archetypal faithful witness (1:5).

How many of these battles are there, and when are they taking place? Revelation seems to depict at least four last battles. This is a battle that has taken place, is taking place and will take place. The beast continues to assault God's holy mountain Zion where he has installed his king and to which he has gathered his people. But every assault is destined to failure for the beast is headed to destruction and his earthly rule is only momentary.

### D. God's Will Be Done (17:15-17)

Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled." (17:15-17)

Finally in his explanation of the beast, the angel turns to that on which the prostitute sits. She sits upon two different things: many waters and the scarlet beast. In the Old Testament Jeremiah described Babylon upon the many waters of her irrigation canals (Jer 51:13). That image is re-visited as the harlot seated upon "the peoples, multitudes, nations and languages." These are "the kings of the earth...and the inhabitants of the earth" whom she has intoxicated with her seductive idolatries (17:2).

Her other mount is the scarlet beast, for harlot and beast are in league together. Both are clothed in scarlet for they are the tools of Satan, the red dragon, and both make pretentious claims to royalty. But the day is coming when God will turn the beast against the woman. God turns evil upon itself in self-destruction. The assault of the beast's ten kings upon the Lamb had come to naught, so now they turn their hatred upon the prostitute, ruining her.

The ten kings were of one purpose in giving their power to the beast to assault the Lamb (17:13, 17). But it was God himself who

propelled them to this one purpose so that his purpose might be done. The beast with his seven heads and ten horns thinks that he has all the power. But he doesn't see the hand of God, he doesn't see that God's purpose trumps his own. This is what Nebuchadnezzar had to learn. This is what Belshazzar did not learn. This is what the seven-headed, ten-horned beast of Revelation never sees. Behind all the evil in the world is a sovereign God moving things along to accomplish his purpose until his words be fulfilled.

This whole book is about the things which must happen (1:1; 22:6). What must happen? Twice the cry goes up, "It is done!" Once for the fall of Babylon (16:17), once for the descent of the New Jerusalem (21:6). Two other climactic proclamations elaborate God's purpose: "The kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). "[T]he dwelling of God [will be] with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3).

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," said Lord Acton. But God uses his absolute power for good, to destroy the corrupting power of earthly tyrants and to install as King a very different type of ruler. He has taken all the evil that the world could throw at him. He sent his own Son as his final witness, his final Word, to a people in hostile rebellion. United in one purpose, they killed this Son, thumbing their nose at God in the worst imaginable way. God took all that. He raised his slain Son to new life, for death could not hold him. He raised his obedient Son to glory, installing him on his mountain as King of kings and Lord of lords. Now he bids all come to this King and there find not brute force but self-giving love and forgiveness.

What of the harlot and the beast who persist in their opposition to God? To quote Caird again, "every power which sets itself up against God shall in the end break itself on the Cross of his Son and the martyr witness of the saints."<sup>2</sup>

The earth-dwellers see the harlot and are seduced, intoxicated by her adulterous idolatries. The earth-dwellers see the beast and, astonished by his apparent total power and invincibility, give him their worship. "But we see Jesus...now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9). Whom do you see today? The seductive harlot, the power-hungry beast, or the self-giving and now-exalted Lamb?

Behold him there, the risen Lamb!

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen! (Rev 1:5)*

1. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 218-219.
2. Caird, *Revelation*, 221.

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