

The helpers of the dragon (13:1–18)

Chapter 13 shows us the agents, instruments, or tools which the dragon uses in his attack upon the Church. Two beasts are described. The first is a monster of indescribable horror. The second has a harmless appearance and for that very reason is even more dangerous than the first. The first beast comes up out of the sea. The second arises from the land. The first is Satan's *hand*. The second is the devil's *mind*. The first represents the persecuting power of Satan operating in and through the nations of this world and their governments. The second symbolizes the false religions and philosophies of this world. Both these beasts oppose the Church throughout this dispensation; yet the apostle describes them in terms that indicate the form which they assumed during the closing decade of the first century AD.¹¹

In 14:8 a third agent is mentioned, namely, Babylon, the harlot. So, in all, three agents are employed by Satan in his attack upon the earth. They are antichristian persecution, antichristian religion, and antichristian seduction.

John notices that the dragon goes to the sea-shore in order to summon help. The dragon, accordingly, must be viewed as standing at a place where sea and land meet; on one side is the sea, on the other the land. The first ally comes up out of the sea. The second arises from the land. The apostle beholds a monster of indescribable horror coming up out of the sea. Very gradually the beast emerges out of the water. First, John sees nothing but the horns. There are ten of them covered with diadems. Next the heads appear. This beast has seven heads and on these heads are names of blasphemy. The body now comes to view. It is that of a leopard, large and fierce, swift to spring upon its prey (*cf.* Dn. 7:6; Ho. 13:7; Hab. 1:8). Now the beast is stepping out of the water. John

1 ¹ See chapter VI, pp. 44f.

sees its feet. They are the feet of a bear. Think of the familiar figure of the bear robbed of her whelps (2 Sa. 17:8; Pr. 17:12; Ho. 13:8); it is ready to rend and tear, anxious with its great and terrible feet to crush its enemy. As the mouth is the main point of the figure, it is mentioned last. This horrible beast has the mouth of a lion: growling and roaring, it is eager for its prey, anxious to destroy (Ps. 17:12; Ho. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:8). To this monster the dragon gives his power and authority. John now notices, looking closely, that one of the seven heads seemed to have received a mortal wound, but the wound has been healed. The whole world follows the beast in wonder and amazement, in the spirit of adoration and worship, saying: 'Who is like unto the beast? and who is able to fight it?' In worshipping the beast, men are also rendering homage to the dragon who gave his authority to it. The beast now begins to speak; it utters great boasts and blasphemies. This continues for forty-two months. The blasphemies are directed against God and all those who dwell in the heavenly tabernacle. And as far as the inhabitants of the earth are concerned, 'it was given unto him to do battle against the saints and to conquer them: and there was given to him authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation. And they shall worship him, all those dwelling on the earth, whose-ever name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb, the one having been slaughtered' (13:7, 8).

We interpret the picture as follows. The sea represents nations and their governments (*cf.* Is. 17:12, where the roaring of peoples is compared to the roaring of the sea; and the surging of nations to the surging of mighty waters).¹² Revelation 17:15 proves the point. The beast that comes up out of the sea is very closely associated with the beast that comes up out of the abyss (11:7). The latter is

2 ¹ See also K. Schilder, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

the final guise which the former assumes. The sea-born beast symbolizes the persecuting power of Satan embodied in all the nations and governments of the world throughout all history. World-dominion directed against God's people wherever and whenever it appears in history, that is the beast. This beast assumes different forms; it has seven heads. Now it is Old Babylonia; then Assyria; next, New Babylonia; Medo-Persia; Macedonia; Rome, *etc.* But though the forms differ, the essence remains the same: worldly government directed against the Church. In this beast the persecuting power of Satan becomes visible. This accounts for the great resemblance between the dragon and the beast; both are cruel monsters having ten horns and seven heads. Observe, however, that in the case of the beast the horns—and not the heads—are crowned, while the dragon wears his diadems of arrogated authority on his head. In other words, it is the dragon, Satan, who rules: his plans are executed by the governments of the world. It is true that earthly rulers, too, wear crowns; think of the crowned horns symbolical of crowned cruelty. But these earthly rulers are subject to and receive their inspiration from Satan! This is true with respect to every worldly ruler who persecutes the Church. These rulers and governments blaspheme God and demand for themselves divine titles. Thus, in the days of John, Roman emperors demanded that their subjects address them as 'Lord', and 'Saviour'. The fact that this beast represents every form of worldly government which persecutes the Church, whenever and wherever it appears in history, becomes very clear when we observe that, according to verse 2, the four beasts which Daniel saw in his vision (Dn. 7) have been combined into one beast here. In Daniel these four beasts represent four successive world empires.¹³ But here this

3 ¹ See chapter VI, p. 46.

composite beast cannot symbolize merely one empire or government. It must indicate all antichristian governments.

One of these seven heads had received a mortal wound, but the wound had been healed. In order to give a correct interpretation of this statement we must bear in mind that the seven heads symbolize seven antichristian empires that succeed one another in history (*cf.* 17:10). Therefore, the statement that one of the heads received a death stroke and that this death stroke was healed must mean that one of these seven empires ceased, for a while, to be a fiercely persecuting power but afterward resumed its former role. Accordingly, the explanation which we regard as the most probable is as follows. The head of which John speaks represents Rome, the Rome of his day. When Nero was emperor (AD 54–68) that cruel tyrant, in order to divert from himself the suspicion that the conflagration of Rome was his act, instigated the persecution of Christians. Some believers were crucified. Others were covered with pitch or oil, nailed to posts, and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob.¹⁴ But in the year AD 68 Nero committed suicide. As persecutor, Rome received its death-stroke. But under Domitian the persecution of believers was resumed. The death-stroke was healed. Rome appears again as the Satan-inspired persecutor of the Church.²⁵ In the days of the apostle the world, in general, worshipped Rome and paid homage to the emperor.

Throughout this entire gospel age—the forty-two months, which we have already discussed³⁶—the governments of this world place themselves on the throne; arrogate to themselves the authority that belongs to God (think of the totalitarian governments of the present day) and blaspheme God and heaven. This condition will finally result in the complete destruction of the Church as a mighty and

4 ¹ See P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, I, p. 381.

5 ² See A. Pieters, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

6 ³ pp. 142ff.

influential organization for the spread of the gospel. For finally every tribe and people and tongue and nation will worship antichristian government (Rev. 13:7 and 11:7 should be compared).⁴⁷ But even in these most dreadful days that shall precede Christ's second coming there will be believers on earth, those whose names have been written from eternity in the Lamb's book of life (*cf.* 17:8).⁵⁸ Because of the fact that God has elected them from eternity to salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth (2 Thes. 2:13), these individuals cannot perish. The government of antichrist may destroy their bodies, but it cannot destroy their souls. Let believers wait patiently for this time of severest tribulation, knowing that all things are included in God's decree; and knowing, in addition, that when the world makes use of the sword in its warfare against the Church, God Himself will avenge this wrong. The individual who understands this will exercise endurance and will persevere in his faith. If anyone has an ear, let him hear these admonitions and take them to heart (verses 9, 10). It is not Satan but God who rules supreme.

Afterwards John sees another beast. It rises from the earth. According to James 3:15 antichristian 'wisdom' comes from the earth (*cf.* Phil. 3:19). But let us see the picture first of all. This beast does not have ten horns but merely two: two little horns just like a lamb. But it speaks like a dragon! This second beast is the servant of the first; that is, it fully co-operates with the first. It performs many tricks and pseudo-miracles to deceive the masses. It brings down fire from heaven; that is, it makes it appear as if fire descends from heaven. It also orders the people to make an image or statue in honour of the first beast. And then it makes the image speak. At last, the people, sunk in superstition and ignorance, are

7 ⁴ See our explanation of 11:7 ff., p. 130ff.

8 ⁵ The words 'from the foundation of the world' modify 'written', as in ASV.

deluded so that they actually believe that speech issues from the image. Furthermore, this second beast orders all who refuse to worship the image of the first beast to be killed. Finally, it orders the mark of the beast to be impressed on the right hand or forehead of everyone as an evidence of loyalty. Those who refuse to receive this mark are boycotted. They are not permitted to buy or sell, or carry on any business. This mark of the beast is at the same time its name or the number of its name. Whoever has a mind, that is, whoever has received wisdom, can explain this number; for it is the number of man, namely 666.

This is, perhaps, the most difficult paragraph in the entire book of Revelation. The main ideas are clear; the details are obscure. Of the many interpretations we regard the following as the most reasonable. We emphasize, however, that in the explanation of the details certainty is wholly lacking.

The second beast is the false prophet (19:20). It symbolizes false religion and false philosophy in whichever form these appear throughout the entire dispensation. Although this beast outwardly resembles the Lamb it inwardly conceals the dragon.¹⁹ In other words, whatever strikes the eye is very appealing and attractive. The beast looks very innocent: a nice little lamb, a pet for the children. But speech reveals the inner thought, life, essence and character. And this lamb speaks like the devil himself! This second beast, accordingly, is the lie of Satan dressed up like the truth. It is Satan masquerading as a shining angel (2 Cor. 11:14). It symbolizes all false prophets in every era of this dispensation. They come disguised as sheep, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves (Mt. 7:15).

9 ¹ Although the definite article is omitted in order to emphasize the character of this beast, yet we immediately feel that this monster is the devil's imitation of the true Lamb of God. In reality, this second beast is inspired by 'the' dragon, Satan.

The two beasts—antichristian government and antichristian religion—work in perfect co-operation. That is invariably the case. It was already true in the days of the apostle: the heathen priest was the friend of the proconsul. The priestly influence supported and upheld the secular power of the state in its persecution of believers. Heathen religion and heathen politics co-operated with one another in their battle against the Church. The priests of the pagan temples did their utmost in order to impress on the minds of the people the lie of Satan: Caesar is Lord! They even resorted to tricks and pseudo-miracles in order to deceive the people. They ordered the inhabitants of the various districts to make statues in honour of the emperor. Think of Pergamum.¹¹⁰ Whoever refused to perform an act of worship in front of such a statue or whoever refused to say, ‘The emperor is Lord’ was put to death.²¹¹ Does the apostle actually intend to tell us that in his day pagan priests, in order to entrench the state religion or emperor-worship more firmly in the minds of the people, would resort to the tricks of causing fire to burst forth without apparent cause and, by the art of ventriloquism, cause speech to issue from the emperor’s statue?³¹² Or do these details belong merely to the picture and must we assign a symbolical interpretation to them? Either way, the ultimate meaning seems to be that throughout this entire dispensation—and in an increasing manner as the coming of the Lord draws near—false prophets, by showing great signs and wonders (Mt. 24:24), shall try to deceive the masses and to strengthen the hand of the government when it bears down upon the Church. Notice, however, verse 15: ‘And it was given unto him.’ Beyond the sphere of God’s permission Satan can do exactly nothing!

10 ¹ See chapter VIII, p. 66.

11 ² See W. M. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

12 ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 100 ff.

Now, to all—small and great, rich and poor, free and bond—the false prophet gives a mark. It is the mark of the first beast. Here the false prophet, in outward appearance, resembles the Lamb. Have not the followers of the Lamb been sealed on their foreheads?⁴¹³ Hence the followers of the beast must be marked or branded on their foreheads or right hands. But what is meant by this ‘mark of the beast’? Various amusing answers have been given.⁵¹⁴ These theories err in this respect, namely, that they interpret this mark as a single, individual, outward, visible sign that will appear on the forehead or hand of the wicked at one particular moment in history; then, and then only. But the beast *always* persecutes the Church and indicates every form of secular power that tries to destroy believers. Wherever and whenever the beast appears, you will also find the mark of the beast. The two go together and cannot be separated.

In order to understand the expression ‘mark of the beast’ we must remember that not only cattle but slaves also were branded or marked. The mark meant that the slave belonged to his master. Very soon the expression ‘to receive the mark of someone’ began to mean to belong to someone, to serve or worship someone. Let us prove this point. In Revelation 14:9 we read: ‘If any man worships the beast ... and receive the mark on his forehead’. Here ‘receiving the mark of the beast’ seems to mean ‘worshipping the beast’. Similarly, in Revelation 14:11: ‘They that worship the beast ... and receive the mark of his name’ (*cf.* also Rev. 20:4). So ‘receiving the mark of the beast’ seems to mean ‘belonging to the beast and worshipping the beast’. The ‘mark of the beast’ is the God-opposing, Christ-rejecting, Church-persecuting spirit of antichrist,

¹³ ⁴ See pp. 68ff., 109ff.

¹⁴ ⁵ The mark of the beast has been interpreted as meaning, *e.g.*, the symbol of freemasonry; the fasces on an American dime; the mono-mark; the observance of the Sabbath on the first day of the week; antichrist’s initials appearing on the forehead of the wicked, and so on.

wherever and whenever it shows itself. This mark is impressed on the forehead or right hand (*cf.* Dt. 6:8). The forehead symbolizes the mind, the thought-life, the philosophy of a person. The right hand indicates his deed, action, trade, industry, *etc.* Therefore receiving the mark of the beast on the forehead or right hand indicates that the person so characterized belongs to the company of those who persecute the Church; and that—either preeminently in what he thinks, says, writes or more emphatically in what he does—this antichristian spirit becomes evident.

This interpretation harmonizes entirely with our explanation regarding the seal which the believer receives on his forehead. This seal indicates that he belongs to Christ, worships Him, breathes His spirit and thinks His thoughts after Him. Similarly, the mark of the beast symbolizes that the unbeliever, who persists in his wickedness, belongs to the beast and therefore to Satan, whom he worships. Observe, however, that there is a difference. The believer receives a seal, the unbeliever a mere mark.¹¹⁵ Throughout the dispensation it has been true (think of Thyatira)²¹⁶ that those people who have not received the mark of the beast and have not worshipped his image have been thwarted in their business pursuits. They are the ones who are crowded out and oppressed. They are not allowed to buy or to sell as long as they remain loyal to their principles. As we approach the end this opposition will increase. Nevertheless, let not the believer despair. Let him remember that the number of the beast is the number of man. Now, man was created on the sixth day. Six, moreover, is not seven and never reaches seven. It always fails to attain to perfection; that is, it never becomes seven. Six means missing the mark, or failure. Seven means perfection or victory. Rejoice, O Church of God! The

15 ¹ See R. C. H. Lenski, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

16 ² See chapter VIII, pp. 71f.

victory is on your side. The number of the beast is 666, that is, failure upon failure upon failure!¹¹⁷ It is the number of man, for the beast glories in man; and must fail!¹⁸

¹⁷ ¹ See C. F. Wishart, *op. cit.*, p. 25. The attempts to arrive at an interpretation by adding the numerical values in the name Nero, Plato and so on, lead to nothing just because they lead to everything. The Apocalypse is a book of symbols; it is not a book of riddles!

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, [*More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1967), 144-151.