

Voices: Not-so-fantastic beasts of Revelation & today

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The season of scary things is upon us. People are decorating their yards with frightening symbols and coming to ring our doorbells and deliver spooky messages. It's election season.

Of course, the same description also conveniently works for Halloween.

As both seasons of trading on fear get nearer, it might be useful to reflect on a frightening passage of Scripture—Revelation 13—a chapter filled with horrible monsters.

Ironically, the book of Revelation is not intended to frighten Christians. Revelation is intended more as a call to worship than a call to fear. Consider the many song breaks in Revelation.

The call to worship comes with instruction to distinguish between what is true and what is false. On one hand, those who appear prosperous and powerful by the world's standards are doomed unless they repent. On the other hand, those who appear conquered will triumph. It all hinges on who is worshipped, who is believed, who is obeyed.

The beasts pictured in Revelation 13

A dragon stands in for Satan, who calls a ten-horned, ten-crowned, seven-headed, leopard-bear-lion to receive worship and to destroy any who oppose him (Revelation 13:8). A second beast looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. His role is to recruit for the first beast, to deceive and to center the economy on worship of the first beast (13:16-17). The first beast

has a PR beast!

Richard Bauckham, in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, asserts John paints a picture with the dragon, the first beast and the second beast not just of an Anti-Christ, but an Anti-Trinity: Satan in place of God, the first beast in place of Jesus, and the second beast in place of the Holy Spirit.

Rivers of ink have been spilled attempting to calculate the number of the beast and which living person it might be. All of these attempts hinge on a strange idea, that God would give to the first-century church a key piece of information to sit on for several thousand years, waiting to be decoded.

The entire book of Revelation was intended first for the first-century church and then for all successive believers. Any first-century Christian living in Asia Minor would have picked up the hints.

Ten horns and ten crowns were the ten emperors of Rome up to that point. The seven heads were the seven hills on which Rome sat. The authority over all the earth set in place by Satan and aided and abetted by Roman religion is the name never mentioned in Revelation—the Roman Empire. The ‘man’ of Revelation 13:18, calculated by a process lost to us in the 21st century, is likely Emperor Nero, who stood as a kind of quintessential Caesar.

So, that’s good news, right? The beastly Roman Empire died a long time ago.

The eternal message of Revelation

Except in not naming Rome, John does more than warn first-century Christians away from worshipping the Roman Empire. In never calling Rome by name but only by names rich in Biblical allusion—Sodom, Egypt (11:8) and Babylon (16:9 and chapters 17-18)—John seems to tell us: “One

Empire is basically the same as any other. They all take the place of God and Christ, they all lie, and they all threaten death.

The book of Revelation is an eternal message for all Christians of all times. The seemingly noble and impressive animals, which some modern interpreters apply to current governments—bears (Russia), dragons (China), eagles (Rome, Napoleonic France, the Third Reich, Arab Nationalism, Mexico, the United States and others)—reveal themselves in Revelation as not-so-fantastic beasts, self-serving and dealing in death.

Revelation pulls back the curtain and declares: “Every empire tries to rule the world by force, economics or both. Every successive empire thinks itself more powerful, wealthier, wiser, more honorable, more glorious and more blessed than the preceding empire. They are all wrong. They are all pretenders. The real ruler of the world is someone else, the only worthy one in heaven or on earth.”

Instead of a beast pretending to be a king, Revelation offers up as the true object of worship and obedience the figure most unlikely to strike fear into our hearts—the Lamb That Was Slain.

Instead of fighting the beast with a sword, the followers of the Lamb are called to conquer in this way: “They overcome [Satan and his minions] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death” (12:11).

The promise is for those who overcome, those who trust not in the power to shed blood but in the shed blood of the Lamb, those who don't fall for the lies but testify to the truth. Though such believers may give their lives for the Lamb's sake, they will go on to live and never die again.

Getting back to election season, I have found it strange over the past several years to hear believers claim God placed obviously unrepentant candidates in office. Perhaps God did place them but for a purpose other

than expected. God may be seeking, not to make any particular nation great, but to reveal the American church's willingness to compromise with unrepentant sin for the sake of wielding power and influence. In so doing, God may be seeking to reveal our wretchedness, reproofing us in love and calling us to repentance and obedience before it's too late.

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