

Revelation: The Church Triumphant Through Christ the Lamb of God

Based upon Jim McGuiggan's work on the book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation: Rome and God's People

Lesson Three

In this lesson, we will learn that ...

- The Roman Empire is shown in three images: Sea-Beast, Earth-Beast, and Great Prostitute/City.
 - The Sea beast stands for Rome as a military and civil power.
 - The Earth beast stands for Rome as a religious power.
 - The Prostitute/City stands for Rome as a commercial, trading power.
 - The entire people of God are represented by the vision of 144,000 people marked out for protection against God's awful anger.
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The central message of the book of Revelation

The central message is that God alone is to be worshiped and served and that that truth is to be maintained when the Roman beast rises against the people of God. The central message of the book is that the Roman Empire is the expression of the world spirit (the Dragon, Satan) that opposes God's kingdom purpose as it shows itself in Jesus Christ and his followers. The central message is that when the smoke clears it's the followers of the Lord Christ that are triumphant and that his Lordship is made concrete and local here on the earth. The Roman Empire claims dominion but it's a satanic claim. They "prove" it by brutality and cruelty. The church insists that Jesus has dominion and they prove it (as followers of Christ) by outliving, out-suffering, and out-lasting Rome. Let's meet some of the leading characters in the book of Revelation.

The central character

The central character in every Bible book is God himself. He's the central character in the book of Revelation. This is what we would expect. We read of him functioning as the Creator and Sustainer of that creation, the Eternal One, the Sovereign, the Judge, the Defender and Vindicator of his people. He's portrayed as the only one deserving of praise and devotion. Having said this we will move on to other lesser characters that play a prominent role in Revelation's story.

The Roman Empire (under three images)

The Sea-Beast (13:1-10).

This image presents Rome as a savage military and civil power. This is one of the beasts in Daniel 7 that comes out of the sea. Waters are used in apocalyptic and prophetic writings as a symbol for the restless nations that clash against each other. Be sure to see Revelation 17:1,15 and Isaiah 17:12-13.

As a military power Rome is unbeatable (Revelation 13:4). She is described as part bear, part leopard and part lion (13:2). The three world powers before her (Babylon, Medo-Persia and Greece) were likened to these animals in Daniel 7:2-6. They had passed away but Rome, like them, was an anti-God power and as long as Rome lived their spirit lived on (see Daniel 7:12). That's why Rome is described as being made up of these three beasts—as long as Rome lives they live.

The sea-beast has seven heads (13:1) that represent seven emperors (17:9) but they also represent the seven hills on which Rome was built (17:9). In 17:11 we will hear of an eighth emperor and we'll say something about the identity of these kings later. Look for a brief comment on the number "eight".

The beast also has ten horns (13:1) that represent Rome allies who will later turn against her and destroy her (17:12,13,16). You'll notice in these verses that the horns are kings that give their authority to the sea-beast.

The power behind Rome is satanic (13:2,4) so we aren't surprised when we read that the beast persecuted the people of God (13:7).

Remember: The Sea-Beast is Rome presented under the image as a destroying civil and military power.

The Earth-Beast (13:11-18)

The earth-beast is also the Roman Empire—looked at from a religious angle. It looks like a lamb but it has the voice of a dragon (13:11). He looks innocent but he is profoundly dangerous.

The earth-beast's job is to make all the nations worship Rome (13:4,12-14). He is called "the false prophet" in 16:13 and 19:20. He does signs that lead people to see Rome as the divine kingdom (see 13:13-14 and 19:20). The Roman Empire had its own priesthood, temples, and sacrificial system, of course, and the "concilium" (the priestly fraternity) went around the heads of states and urged the worship of Rome as the goddess Roma and the Roman ambassadors and emperors as her visible representatives. The emperor was the high priest.

Remember: The earth-beast and sea-beast are both Rome. They portray Rome from two different angles. They present her as a false religious system and a ruthless military power whose kingdom was of this world. (Be sure to see Daniel 7 and note that the beasts arise from the sea and are yet called kingdoms of the "earth" (as distinct from the kingdom of heaven).

The Prostitute & the City (17:1 and chapter 18)

The prostitute who is also a great city is also Rome—looked at as a vast commercial power. Every nation wants to make alliances with her (go to bed with her, so to speak—see 17:2 and 18:3). She is the city built on seven hills and rules the world while John writes his book (17:18). She is the great city with whom all the merchants of the earth trade in both buying and selling. Read the whole of chapter 18 and see how this is spelled out in great detail.

And what makes her so seductive and appealing? Why is she (as chapter 18 shows) the leading market place of the world? Why does every nation want to trade with her? Because she is supported by the most powerful military engine on earth. The Prostitute rides on (is supported by) the sea-beast (17:3). The most powerful nation was also the greatest buyer of goods and if you wanted to do business you "got in bed" with her. It's important that you take time to read chapter 18 because it makes it crystal clear that the great Whore is a vast commercial center, supported by unstoppable military power.

Late in chapter 17 the sea-beast along with the allies turn against the Whore and tear her to shreds. Some think that that means they both can't be Rome but this is shortsighted indeed. The historians tell us that Rome destroyed itself (see any good history of the Roman Empire and whatever its limitations *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbons) and we can see that kind of activity down through history. Nations ceaselessly destroy themselves. Do I need to mention Ireland, Russia, China, America and the rest, nations that have torn themselves apart down the years? Rome was no exception.

Remember: The Prostitute is Rome presented as the world's leading commercial power and to "fornicate with her made the nations rich" (18:3,9,11,15).

Summary: Rome is presented in the book of Revelation from three distinct perspectives. She was a powerful military power (Sea-Beast), a false religious system that wooed the nations from worship to the true God (Earth-Beast) and the marketplace for the world (a Prostitute/City)! As with all the major characters in the book we get more than one picture of her and each angle tells its own story.

The people of God (under four images. Description continued in Lesson Four.)

The 144,000 that are sealed (7:3-17)

Be sure to see the brief comments later on the significance of numbers in prophetic and apocalyptic literature. See particularly the numbers *twelve* and *one thousand*. The 144,000 are said to be God's servants (7:3). They have the name of Jesus and his Father written on their foreheads (14:1 and see 3:12). They follow the Lamb, keep themselves pure and speak the truth (14:4). They are those that are redeemed from the earth and purchased from among men (14:3-4).

The 144,000 represent the followers of God in Jesus Christ in their totality. They make up the whole people of God (the full twelve tribes). Notice the multiple of twelve used for emphasis.

They aren't literal Jews nor are they literal virgins (which is what they're called in 14:4). They are called Jews in this book of symbols and images because "Jew" was the name for the elect of God down the centuries and in the biblical record. An Old Testament name is applied to New Covenant people. This *might* also be the case with "circumcision" in Philippians 3:3. But in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 John makes it clear there are Jews who don't have the heart that the name Jew speaks of. (Jew, from Judah, which speaks of giving praise to Yahweh.) Notice that in 3:12 non-Jewish believers are said to have Christ's name written on them.

These 144,000 are said to be sealed. It is protection in the face of the judgment of the Lamb mentioned in 6:12-17. The judgment is not to fall until the servants of God are sealed (7:3). Will the awful judgment of 6:12-17 sweep everyone away? No! The judgment there is against the ungodly and so the faithful followers of God are not subjected to it.

This image of marking out the faithful is borrowed from Ezekiel 9:4-6. You need to read that whole section in Ezekiel for yourself. This is all visionary. Nobody here or in Ezekiel literally puts a mark on anybody. It was a vision Ezekiel saw (8:3) and when the judgment took place in actual fact there wasn't a mark on anybody. John is seeing the same thing happening in Revelation 7. It's the visionary way of saying (he is being told by means of a picture) that the followers of God are under his protection during the judgment. Under his protection because they are his.

But—and this is an important but—while the wrath of God is not directed at His people this does not mean they don't suffer. But does this assurance mean anything since the saints are going to suffer? Yes, because there's a profound difference between *punishment* and *suffering*. When God poured out His 586 BC judgment on wicked Israel many of the righteous suffered along with the guilty but no matter what *appearances* said the prophet's vision told the truth. So it is in Revelation. The assurance that the people of God have nothing to fear from God's judgment is spelled out in 7:9-17.

See in your mind's eye angels putting a mark on the 144,000. Is it worth it to be sealed or marked? Now read 7:14 where we're told that the great multitude is those who have successfully come out of the great tribulation against which the 144,000 are sealed. It's the 144,000 that are sealed against the judgment (7:2-3) but it's the great multitude that comes out of the tribulation. What does that tell you? It tells you that the two groups are the same and that the sealing works!

Remember: The 144,000 are God's people under the Old Testament name of Israel.

Exercises for Lesson Three

Complete the following statements.

1. It's the visionary way of saying (he is being told by means of a picture) **that the followers of God are under his protection during the judgment.**_____
2. They had passed away, but Rome, like them, **was an anti-God power and as long as Rome lived their spirit lived on (see Daniel 7:12).**_____
3. Remember: The Prostitute is Rome **presented as the world's leading commercial power and to "fornicate with her made the nations rich" (18:3,9,11,15).**_____
4. The beast also has ten horns that represent **Rome allies who will later turn against her and destroy her (17:12,13,16).**_____
5. The 144,000 represent **the followers of God in Jesus Christ in their totality.** _____
6. As with all the major characters in the book **we get more than one picture of her and each angle tells its own story.**_____

Check off each of the following references after you have read it.

Four Nations described as Four Beasts

____ Daniel 7:2-6

1000 used figuratively

____ Psalm 50:10

God's people marked for protection

____ Ezekiel 9:1-6

The fall of Babylon the Great (Rome)

____ Revelation 18:1-24

Nations described as many waters/rebuked by God

____ Isaiah 17:12-13

Nineveh punishment described in symbols

____ Nahum 3:1-7

True or False?

1. The 144,000 are literally Jews. F
2. The central character in Revelation is God. T
3. The seven heads of Revelation 13:2 represent seven emperors. T (explain interpretation problem - see Red body text)
4. Ezekiel 9 mentions marking the righteous. T
5. The great Prostitute is Rome seen as a world trade and commercial center. T
6. The Earth-Beast is Rome seen as a military/civil power. F
7. The seven heads of Revelation 13:2 represent seven hills. T
8. The 144,000 and the great Multitude of Revelation 7:9 are the same people from different angles. T
9. Committing fornication with the great Prostitute means having alliances & trade agreements with her. T
10. The Sea-Beast is Rome seen as a military/civil power. T

Underline the scripture that teaches ...

1. Waters are used to symbolize nations.
Revelation 1:3 **Revelation 17:15** Daniel 7:2-6
2. The Earth-Beast leads people to worship the Sea-Beast.
Revelation 22:6 Revelation 16:3 **Revelation 13:13-14**
3. The name of **Jesus (the Lamb's Father)** is written on the 144,000.
Revelation 1:1 Revelation 14:3-4 **Revelation 14:1**
4. The Prostitute was the city that ruled the world.
Revelation 3:12 Revelation 17:9 **Revelation 17:18**