

Question: What is the book of Revelation talking about when it discusses the mark of the beast, and the anti-Christ? Are these prophecies meant to reflect people in positions of power in the 21st century?

Answer: The book of Revelation is the most controversial and difficult for contemporary readers of the bible to understand. In fact, biblical exegetes through the centuries who wrote commentaries on each book of the Bible often shied away from the difficulty that Revelation posed. One of the last books accepted into the canon, Revelation today maintains an aura of mystery for the common reader. Perhaps the most important idea to remember when reading the book of Revelation is that it was intended for a specific audience at a fixed time and date; roughly sometime between 90-95 A.D. (Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: Revelation*; 9). This is important, and must be carried throughout the reading of the text. As a document intended for a specific group of people at a specific time in history, it is probable that the intended audience would have understood the vivid symbolism as representations of actual events and persons in their world. This fact cannot be lost when modern readers of Revelation begin wondering who and what specific images or persons are being referenced when John uses the vivid imagery and language in his text. We are told at the very beginning of Revelation that it was written by a man named John. The John who wrote Revelation is not to be confused with the John who wrote the fourth gospel. John's audience would have been Christian inhabitants of the Roman Empire somewhere in Asia. Christians in the early to mid 90's A.D. would have been very much aware of the oppressive nature the Roman Empire had toward the Christian sect. The Roman emperor Domitian, who ruled from 81-96 A.D. was a tyrant who had no patience for Christians. He persecuted Christians much like his earlier predecessor Nero (ruled from 54-68). With this said, there is no indication that the audience John wrote to in Asia faced the types of persecutions those Christians closer to Rome would have endured. John would have written to an Asian audience who was trying to survive, and for the most part assimilate, to a characteristically standard way of Roman living. This meant that Christians were living like Romans in almost every way except in regards to religious practices. John's letter is directed to these people. His stance was that Christians should completely reject the Roman way of living and the Roman Empire as a whole (Harrington, *Revelation*; 11). With the rejection of the world in which he lived, John also believed (like many Christians) that the end of the world was imminent (Harrington, *Revelation*; 13).

The question above specifically addresses the images in chapter 13 of Revelation. Here, two beasts emerge as agents of Satan worshipping and serving him by confusing, and misguiding human beings. The two beasts given authority by Satan emerge as leaders who wage war against the holy ones and demand to be worshipped themselves. The first beast, coming out of the sea has ten horns and seven heads, one of the heads of the beast appears to have a mortal wound that has healed, "Fascinated, the whole world followed after the beast" (Revelation 13:3). The second beast is similarly hideous with two horns. It performs great signs, and deceives (13:11-17). These two beasts are often referred to as the anti-Christ. Today, some Christian sects argue that modern leaders who rule the world are the beasts described by John. However, there is no evidence, historical or biblical, that point to the relationship between John's Revelation written nearly two thousand years ago and contemporary political or religious figures of today. Instead, as was said in the opening paragraph, these beasts described by John had to have meaning and applicability for the intended audience of John's narrative in the first century.

Biblical scholars have shown that these beasts do in fact carry meaning directly targeting specific people and entities in the 1st century world. John's Revelation, borrowing heavily from the book of Daniel for images of the beasts (see specifically Daniel 7), sees them as real political figures in the Roman world (Harrington, *Revelation*, 140). Specifically, the first beast is the Roman Empire. The blasphemous names (13:5) that it utters, references the claim by the Roman emperors to be gods themselves. The mortal wound ((13:3) signifying a return from the dead) represents the emperor Nero who committed suicide. A legend spread in the first century of Nero rising from the dead only to return to Rome and rule again after destroying the empire for rejecting him. By all accounts of the legend, as in life, Nero would return "bringing destruction" (Harrington, *Revelation*, 5). Similarly to the first beast, the second beast represents the power of the Roman Imperial Cult; that is, the influence for worship of Roman gods. The reference to economic woes (13:17) is very much applicable to the fact that if one were to be an artisan in the 1st century, they would be required to join a pagan guild, an unacceptable action for a Christian because they would have to offer sacrifice to Roman gods (Harrington, *Revelation*, 144). The mark the second beast gives human beings (13:16) is not to be understood as a literal brand, rather, it refers to the mark that all people who follow the misguided ways of Satan bear in direct contrast to the mark of the Lamb (Christ) we all bear as followers of Jesus ((7:3) Harrington, *Revelation*, 144-145).

With the facts above, the question becomes whether or not the book of Revelation is applicable to our day and age. The answer is an emphatic yes. Though we cannot and must not apply the images John wrote for contemporary people and institutions of his time, we can use the symbolism in Revelation as a warning and directive to be leery of those institutions that cause oppression. The first beast is an oppressive character forcing people to worship him. As Christians, we are to reject institutions that cause oppression as well as the shameless selfishness that we as a culture face (Harrington, *Revelation*, 32). Therefore, the beast (or anti-Christ) in modern context can be seen as the power of sin and the desire for power to control others.