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Revelation 13 and the Imperial Cult

Introduction

Among the book of Revelation, chapter 13 is considered the key part as well as the hardest part to understand. It links the dragon image in chapter 12 with the final battle of Armageddon in the later chapters, by describing the concrete and vivid image of the two beasts. There are many interpretations of the two beasts, and many scholars consider those images implying the imperial cult. John describes the first beast and the second beast as the Roman emperor and the promoters of the imperial cult, respectively.

Therefore, to understand this chapter as well as the whole book, it is necessary to understand how these beasts are related to the imperial cult. And in this paper, I will also discuss the significance of imperial cult for Christians in the late first Century to the Revelation 13, and John's purpose in writing.

Understanding the Chapter

Revelation 13 is divided into two parts: the first beast from the sea (Revelation 13:1-10), and the second beast from the land (Revelation 13:11-18). Being linked with the previous chapter, the two beasts in chapter 13 are described as the subordinates of Satan. The dragon, an image of Satan, was thrown from heaven to the earth (12:9), and is preparing for a final war against God.

The first beast rises from the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, resembles the characteristics of the dragon (12:3; 13:1). The sea often means the abyss of chaos (Gen 1:1)¹, and it also means the place Leviathan or Behemoth² rule over (Isa. 27:1; Job. 40:15; 41:2; Psa. 74:13). And in Jewish tradition, it was believed that God defeated those sea beasts in order to create an ordered world.³ The first beast and its followers worshiped the dragon (13:4), for he had given them power (13:2) and authority (13:2; 13:4; 13:7). Because of its terrible appearance (13:2), ability to recover from a fatal wound (13:3), as well as its power and authority, John describes the beast as an invincible being. Nobody seems to be comparable to it or able to fight against it (13:4).

The first beast speaks blasphemous words and has blasphemous names on its head as well. To emphasize the monstrous and dangerous aspects of the beast, John might have used the four beast figures or kingdoms in Daniel 7:4-6.⁴ It is allowed to have authority for forty-two months (13:5), a temporal indicator that has both a literal and a symbolical meaning. Literally, it is the length of time when the temple of Jerusalem had been desecrated by the Antiochus Epiphanes. Similarly, in the book of Revelation, it is the time that all nations are allowed to trample the Holy City (11:2), the time when two witnesses prophesy in the Holy City (11:3), and the time when the woman is protected from the dragon (12:6; 12:14).⁵ On the other hand, it symbolically means a finite amount of time when the forces of evil are permitted by God. For Him, it is the time to test the faithful as well as the unfaithful.⁶

¹ The word for “deep” in Gen. 1:1 is the Hebrew *tehom*, which becomes “the abyss” in the Septuagint. See Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon: the Revelation to John* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), 298.

² Behemoth is usually identified as a hippopotamus and Leviathan as a crocodile or a mythological dragon. See Michael V. Fox, “Behemoth and Leviathan” *Biblica* 93.2 (2012): 261-267.

³ Leonard L. Thompson, *Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵ Catherine G. Gonzalez, and Justo L. Gonzalez, *Revelation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

The second beast arises from the earth. It has horns like a lamb, but speaks like a dragon (13:11). It encourages all the inhabitants of the earth to worship the first beast (13:12), and performs various great signs (13:13-14). Being given power and authority from the first beast, it orders an image of the first beast to be made (13:14), and kills those who refuse to worship it (13:15). And it causes everyone, whether rich or poor, slave or free, to be marked with the name of the beast or the number of its name (13:16-17). And its number is 666 (13:18).

The beast from the earth seems to be a subordinate of the first beast. Fundamentally, however, it is a subordinate of the dragon, Satan. The second beast symbolizes the false prophet, which can be compared to the two witnesses in Revelation 11:1-13. It will act like a lamb, which symbolizes Jesus Christ and his followers. But in reality, it is a deceiver who speaks like a dragon, meaning the false prophet and his teachings. Its main task is to encourage worship of the first beast. In order to promote worship, it will affect everyday living: without the mark of the beast given by the second beast, no one can trade their products (13:17).

Above all, the most significant idea in Revelation 13 is the parody between the holy Trinity and unholy trinity. While using the parody, John discloses the real face of the unholy trinity. He is trying to compare God the Father, Christ the lamb, and the Holy Spirit with the dragon, the first beast, and the second beast, respectively. They both are related to worship: the holy Trinity is worthy of worship, while the unholy trinity demands worship. And they put a mark on their followers: the holy trinity gives the mark/seal of God (7:3), while the unholy trinity gives the mark of the beast (13:16). Third, the dragon giving his power and authority to the first beast, who gives it to the second beast, parallels the transfer of power and authority from God to Christ, and from Christ to the Holy Spirit.

Each person of both trinities can be compared as well. As God gives life, so the dragon

gives death. As Christ comes to bring the peace of God, so the first beast comes to bring violence and exploitation. As the Holy Spirit exposes the truth of all things, so the second beast hides the truth of all things.⁷ However, the Holy Trinity will conquer and rule forever, while the unholy trinity will do so only for a limited time (13:5). Ultimately, God will bring the new heavens and the new earth (21:1-2). There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (21:4), and whoever overcomes the final judgment will inherit everything (21:7).

By understanding the image of the beast in Revelation 13 and by comparing both trinities, we can see that the first is the opposite side of the Christ the lamb, or an Anti-Christ figure and its followers.⁸ Behind the scene, however, John's intention is to criticize the Roman Empire and its imperial cult. In other words, the first beast indicates the Roman Empire⁹ or the emperor himself, and the second beast is a group of government officials who promote the imperial cult.

There are several ideas that support John's negative understanding of the Roman Empire. First of all, John describes the appearance of the beast as a combination of the four beasts from book of Daniel 7:4-6. And he also emphasizes its monstrous and dangerous character, as well as its dreadful, scary, and invincible aspects. Second, the beast from the sea, in 13:1, may indicate the Roman Empire. Geographically, Italy seems to rise out of the Mediterranean Sea. And it may also point out the annual arrival at Ephesus of the high governor from Rome.¹⁰ Lastly, the repetitive usage of the word "authority" in Revelation 13 (13:2, 4, 5, 7, and 12) shows that both beasts are highly related in terms of politics.¹¹ John probably did not use the word "authority" for

⁷ Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 166.

⁸ The author of this commentary is the only one who does not directly associate the beast with imperial cult, but with the Anti-Christ figure. See Ibid. 162.

⁹ David E. Aune explains the first beast as a Roman Empire, not specific individual. See David E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary 52B* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1998), 729-730.

¹⁰ Nelson J. Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 49-50.

¹¹ Mangina, *Revelation*. 160.

the church itself, and he wrote in a time when the term “church politics” was not established. Therefore, the political authority that John mentioned in Revelation 13 probably means the political authorities of the Roman Empire.

Imperial cult

Many scholars agree that John’s purpose in writing Revelation 13 with such high symbolism is to point to the imperial cult for the early Christians in the late first Century. Such terms ‘Roman imperial cult’ and ‘emperor worship’ are used for the variety of activities or cultural expressions of worshiping the Roman Emperor in gratitude for bringing peace, order, and prosperity to the Empire.¹² Those activities or cultural expressions include: the construction of temples and altars, the offering of various kinds of sacrifices in the imperial temples, musical and dramatic performances, athletic competitions, the establishment of priesthoods to be in charge of the operation, the attribution of certain qualities, and the use of various titles, such as savior, Lord, god, or son of god.¹³

The beginning of the imperial cult in the Latin West goes back to the first decade or so of the reign of the Emperor Augustus.¹⁴ However, the idea of worshiping the high ruler originated in the Orient. People in the East considered their kings as the incarnation of the gods. From the Greek myths, it is easily seen that some people were considered a descendant of a god or divine hero. They also had a tendency to think of successful politicians and soldiers as divine beings.

Before the conquest of Alexander, ‘leader worship’ or ‘hero worship’ was limited to specific regions. Some cities, such as Amphipolis and Cynosagoras, gave divine honors to Philip,

¹² Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹³ Michael. Naylor, "The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation" *Currents in Biblical Research* 8 (2010): 207-210.

¹⁴ Duncan. Fishwick, *The imperial cult in the Latin West* 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 97-149.

Alexander's father, and the city of Ephesus erected a statue of him in the temple of Artemis.¹⁵ After the conquest of Alexander, however, the Hellenistic ruler cult expanded widely in the Hellenistic world. Alexander himself believed that he was a descendant of a god, and some of his successors, like Antiochus Epiphanes, followed Alexander and promoted themselves as a divine being.

The ruler cult transferred to the Romans when they conquered the Hellenistic world. The worship of the power of Rome, as well as her generals, consuls, and local governors, was a widespread phenomenon even before the reign of Augustus. Many proconsuls from Rome were identified with local gods, and worship, ceremonies, and even sacrifices were devoted to them.¹⁶ Ruler worship also became an empire-wide phenomenon in several provinces west of Rome, such as Hispania, Lusitania, Britannica, and Gallia. And the eastern provinces of Dacia, Dalmatia, and Pannonia had their own systems of regional cults.¹⁷

Augustus may have understood the political usefulness of the imperial cult. His adoptive father, Julius Caesar, received many divine honors when he successfully won the civil war, and many citizens from Asia Minor built temples to him in order to get his favor. Because of this, Caesar could claim the title "son of a god"¹⁸, which gave him a political advantage over possible enemies. Since Augustus, Roman emperors used the imperial cult as an effective tool to support the public order, as well as to reinforce their authority.

There were many temples built all around the Roman Empire, including the cities where the seven churches were located (Revelation 2-3). The imperial cult of each city is:

Pergamum: a temple of Rome and Augustus; Smyrna: Tiberius and Livia; Sardis: Augustus,

¹⁵ A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: the Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 281.

¹⁶ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. 1972), 28.

¹⁷ Fishwick, *The imperial cult in the Latin West* 3.

¹⁸ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*. 56-57.

Antonius Pius, and Faustina¹⁹; Philadelphia: Caracalla; Thyatira: ‘a royal room’ for Hadrian; Laodicea: an imperial temple. Most of all, the city of Ephesus functioned as the religious center of Asia Minor. It had a series of imperial temples, such as a temple to Roma, Julius Caesar, Augustus, as well as one to Artemis (Act 19:23-28).²⁰

Conflict between the Imperial Cult and Early Christianity

Once the imperial cult became popular across the Empire, Christians inevitably had a conflict with it, as well as with their pagan neighbors. The imperial cult became a part of mainstream Roman culture. Politically, it worked as a unifying idea under Roman domination. As A. Kee notes, it was a religious ritual, but it also worked as a political ideology.²¹ In other words, Christian practices could not be accepted in the Roman Empire religiously or politically. Eventually, the cult led the Romans, as well as pagan neighbors, to have a conflict with and persecute Christians.

There are several reasons for the conflict. First, the Romans had a negative attitude towards the Jewish people, and this may have affected the early Christians. *The Histories*,²² written by the Roman historian Tacitus in A.D. 109, shows the various reasons for the negative impression made by Jews. Culturally, they chose their ‘national superstition’ rather than accepting ‘Hellenistic civilization.’ Their religion struck Romans as tasteless and mean, and they did not give honors to the Roman emperors because they did not allow any images which could be understood as an idol. These Jewish behaviors and activities may have seemed strange to the

¹⁹ Emperor Antonius Pius’ wife. Faustina the Elder.

²⁰ ‘A Catalogue of Imperial Temples and Shrines in Asia Minor’ cited from: S. R. Price, *Rituals and power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 249-274.

²¹ A. Kee, “The Imperial Cult: the Unmasking of an Ideology,” *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1985): 112-128.

²² Tacitus, *The Histories* 5 cited from: <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.5.v.html>.

Romans. Similar to this understanding, *The Annals*²³, explains how Christians come to be abhorred by Romans.

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.

It is hard to extend Tacitus' view to cover the entire empire. However, the Romans may have taken a similar negative stance towards Christians because they considered it as a variation of Judaism.

Second, the Jewish revolt against Rome may also have affected early Christians. The center of the early church before A.D. 70 was Jerusalem. However, the revolt of A.D. 66-70 as well as the following persecution of Jews by Roman Empire, affected Christianity. It caused Christianity to be spread among the gentiles - most Christians at that time only spread towards to the Jewish people. Although some of the early Christians were loyal Roman citizens, they have been considered equally to those rebellious Jews.

A third reason for the conflict was the exclusiveness of the early Christians. Most Christians lived in cities and had pagan neighbors. However, their desire to maintain their religious identity led Christians to be separated from their neighbors and forced them to have isolated jobs. Tertullian, from his writing, *On Idolatry*, shows the list of proper occupations for Christians. Artisan, magician, teacher, trader, public official, and officer are occupations that Christians could not have.²⁴ Furthermore, going to an amphitheater, receiving a pagan blessing,

²³ Tacitus, *The Annals* 15 cited from: <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html>

²⁴ Tertullian, J. H. Waszink, J. C. M. Van Winden, and P. G. Van der Nat, *De idololatria / Tertullianus; critical text, translation, and commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1987). 33-45.

or having an extravagant lifestyle are prohibited.²⁵ This argument of Tertullian seems highly radical, and it could have caused Christians to have social isolation as well as aversion from the Romans.

A fourth factor was social prejudice related to the Christians. Christians were often considered atheists because they did not believe in or honor Greco-Roman deities. They also suffered from several false accusations, including infanticide, cannibalism, and incest. These accusations can be found in the letter that Pliny, the governor of the province of Bithynia, wrote to the Emperor Trajan. The main purpose of his letter is to ask the emperor how to deal with the Christians. His letter also deals with the reasons for accusations by their neighbors.

So far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, they swore to keep from theft, robbery, adultery, breach of faith, and not to deny any trust money deposited with them when called upon to deliver it. This ceremony over, they used to depart and meet again to take food but of an ordinary, harmless kind.²⁶

The only reason that Pliny could accuse Christians is that they refused to worship the Emperor; he did not act on the accusations made by their pagan neighbors. Whether the accusation is true or not, it justified the persecution by the enemies of Christianity.

Fifth, some conflicts were caused by economic factors. Demetris, an artisan in the city of Ephesus, incited a riot of his fellow workers against Paul. As indicated in Acts 19:23-28, the conflict arose because Paul was saying that gods made with hands are not gods (Acts 19:26). Paul's argument, on the other hand, could have been perceived as an economic threat. Many artisans in the city of Ephesus relied on selling idols for their living, and many other occupations were related to the idol trade, including the breeding of cows or lambs for sacrifice, woodcraft, dye and leather production for cultic rituals, and the provision of rooms for temple visitors from

²⁵ Ibid., 33-45.

²⁶ "Exchange of Letters between Governor Pliny to Emperor Trajan" *Revelation and General Letters Course Pack*. 32.

across the empire. In other words, the Ephesians were furious with Paul because they were economically relying on the temples. When the number of Christians increased, the income from the temples declined. The economic pressure and unrest caused by increasing Christians became the reason for the persecution.

Understanding the Imperial Cult in Revelation 13

There is a more fundamental reason why Christianity could not go along with the imperial cult. Religiously, the imperial cult was considered idolatrous. Contrary to A. Kee, political allegiance to the Roman emperor was expressed by worshiping him.²⁷ And there were several anti-Christ figures who demanded worship and acted against God, including Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander, and Antiochus Epiphanes. John may have regarded the imperial cult as idolatrous because he associated it with various anti-Christ figures from the past.

This may have led him to write Revelation 13 using various symbols indicating the key features of the imperial cult. Just as previous blasphemous rulers had posed a threat to God's people, the Roman emperors would do the same. To warn Christians who may already have acknowledged that anti-Christ figures existed previously, he combined features of the four beasts of Daniel 7:4-6 into a single invincible beast to describe the image of the imperial cult.

In this sense, many scholars agree that the first beast symbolizes the Roman Empire or the Roman emperor himself, and the second beast symbolizes the promoters of the imperial cult. As mentioned above, their goal was to be worshiped by Roman citizens. In other words, the intended function of the imperial cult, in a political sense, was to serve as a unifying force throughout the empire.

However, John noticed that Satan lies behind the scene. Just as other anti-Christ figures

²⁷ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*. 56.

did throughout the history, Satan manipulates everything behind: Satan gave his authority to the Roman emperor and to the promoters of the cult. In this sense, the imperial cult was not just a matter of worshiping the emperor, but of worshiping Satan. Their forces will act like a lamb – Caesar claims to bring peace to the world by unifying every nation under the rule of Rome – but speak like a dragon – their hidden purpose is to worship Satan. Since their goal is to entice human beings into the realm of the evil, they will use every method to force Christians to worship the realm of Satan instead of God. It is impossible to confront the Roman Empire, since they are the most powerful empire on earth. “No one seems to like the beast, and no one seems to fight against it (13:4).”

The mark given by the beast is another religious symbol that John is using to explain the characteristics of the imperial cult. It signifies the realm of evil, and it seems that John is only emphasizing the economic aspect of the imperial cult because the mark is used for trading purposes. However, John’s purpose in mentioning the mark in his book should have other reasons. The mark of the beast is the dualistic counterpart of the seal of God (7:1-8). David Aune suggest four interpretations regarding the mark.²⁸ The most common interpretation associates it with a brand of “ownership.” Another possible meaning is that the mark of the beast evokes Roman coins, in terms of buying or selling products. Deissman, on the other hand, understands the mark as a seal or stamp representing the authority of the emperor.²⁹ However, in terms of its being placed on the right hand and forehead, the mark of the beast could be a parody of the Jewish *Tefillin*. *Tefillin* is the box or amulets containing scripture passages. It was usually worn on the hand and the forehead (Deut. 6:8). If the mark is meant to parody *Tefillin*, John understands the “false prophets” as the ones who only ‘wear’ the holy words. They seem to be

²⁸ Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary* 52B. 767-768.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 768.

loyal to Christianity by wearing the scriptures, but they have the mark of the beast, which recalls the *Tefillin* and the seal of God. The Bible speaks of false prophets inside of the church (2 Thessalonians 2:3), and of many anti-Christes rising up to oppose God (1 John 2:18; 4:3). With the rise of the imperial cult, as well as its promoters, John may have thought that the *eschaton* was at hand. In this sense, his intention in writing Revelation is to declare that the end is near.

John may also have been aware that the imperial cult had an impact of Christians not only in a religious aspect, but also in the everyday lives of Christians. Some titles related to the imperial cult were also commonly used by Christians. Titles like ‘son of a god’ were used to honor Christ as well as to honor the emperor.³⁰ David Rensberger focuses on the term “savior of the world” in the gospel of John (4:42), and notes that it is the exact same title for speaking of the divinity of the emperor.³¹ In other words, the imperial cult deeply impacted the lives of Roman citizens, and the Roman emperor was accepted as a divine being. This could have affected the early Christians. Further the Greek word *Kerygma* seems to be used in a secular sense. Early Christians used this term in reference to the ‘good news’, ‘gospel’, and to the ‘current blessings.’ However, this word was first used as a term related to the imperial cult, especially to announce emperor’s birthday. It was also used in various ceremonies and in celebrations of military victory.³² Ahn suggests that Christians adopted this word in order to demonstrate the greatness of God over the authority and power of Roman Empire.³³

There are other examples that the imperial cult seems to have penetrated the everyday lives of Christians. By refusing to worship the emperor and obtain his mark, they would be prohibited from buying or selling any kinds of products. As David Aune notes, the mark indicate

³⁰ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*. 56-57.

³¹ D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1988). 13.

³² T. Ahn, *Research of the terminology of Kerygma*, Master’s Thesis, (Methodist Theological Seminary, Seoul, South Korea), 2005.

³³ To adopt certain terminology from the other religion or practices was considered as a way of demonstrating superiority than others. *Ibid*.

Roman coins, in terms of buying or selling products.³⁴ Secondly, as mentioned above, not participating in the cultic practices would cause Christians to be alienated from their pagan neighbors. This would give rise to false accusations and misunderstanding of Christians by their neighbors. Lastly, the imperial cult itself was a ‘sacred law.’ Since the emperor was regarded as a divine being, the cult itself also had divine characteristics. Therefore, anyone who violated the cult, was considered a rebel and had to be punished.

We can see that John’s intention was to describe the current issues regarding the imperial cult, as well as the possible future dangers right before the second coming of Christ. And his eschatology could have influenced this idea. However, Revelation does not reflect persecution in reality. John may have thought that more harsh persecution would come in the near future based on previous historical examples. But despite the impression given by Revelation 13, there was no empire-wide persecution during his time. Some emperors in the first and second centuries, such as Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, led the persecution among Christians. However, these persecutions were based on the emperor’s independent reaction to Christianity³⁵, and were not done systematically. Most persecutions, before the third century, were on the local level, and were mostly instigated by the pagan neighbors of Christians.

Conclusion

To sum up, we can see that John uses several symbolic images to explain the characteristics of the imperial cult in Revelation 13. Even though it apparently deals with the story of the two beasts, the chapter contains several meanings that John wanted to point out about the imperial cult. We can see that his purpose in writing this chapter was to warn of the

³⁴ Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary*. 767.

³⁵ S. Lee, *Research of the Persecution among Early Church: from Examples of the 1-2C*, Master’s Thesis, (Han-il Theological Seminary, Seoul, South Korea), 2005.

dangers of the imperial cult and to show how it had penetrated the lives of early Christians.

From this idea, Revelation 13 is applicable to Christians today. Modern-day Christians should be counter-cultural when it comes to aspects of contemporary culture. It does not mean that Christians should withdraw from society. On the other hand, Christians should focus on changing those aspects of culture that go against God's purposes for the world, such as materialism, injustice, strict nationalism, or celebrity culture. Finally, John's major intention in Revelation is to encourage Christians to stay awake and to hope for eternity. Those who remain faithful witnesses are like Jesus Christ (1:5) and will receive the crown of eternal life (James 1:12).

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