

*Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati*

## **Between Fascination and Destruction**

### **Considerations on the Power of the Beast in Rev 13:1–10**

Rev 13:3b contains a peculiar sentence I would like to quote to introduce the topic of this article: *καὶ ἐθαυμάσθη ὅλη ἡ γῆ ὀπίσω τοῦ θηρίου*. A literal translation could be: 'And the whole earth wondered behind the beast'.

In this sentence two points in particular need further investigation. First, there is a grammatical problem with the strange construction *ἐθαυμάσθη ... ὀπίσω τοῦ θηρίου*, which is neither Greek nor Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> Second, according to other passages in Revelation, it does not seem possible that the whole earth admires and honours the beast, since at the very least John's addressees know who it is and whence it comes. Or do they not? The quoted sentence presents an ambiguous, unclear scene of adoration, which is quite typical for Revelation.

This paper aims to analyse this ambiguity and to clarify the impressive presentation of the beast's power in Revelation. What kind of connotations are employed? How is this negative power interpreted and theologically situated? To approach these questions I have selected the vision of the beast emerging from the sea in Rev 13:1–10. First, I will examine the topic with a text-internal view of the beast's power. Second, I will present some reflections about the link between text and historical background. Third, I will briefly consider the historical context.

### **The Adoration of the First Beast (Rev 13:1–10)**

To find a possible answer to the questions arising from Rev 13:3b it is necessary to consider the whole unit, Rev 13:1–10. For the first time the beast and its power are presented in full.<sup>2</sup> The vision can be structured as follows:

#### *Description of the beast (vv. 1–3a)*

1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great

<sup>1</sup> This construction is without parallel in Greek and in Hebrew. See e.g. R.H. CHARLES, *Revelation*, 350–351, G.K. BEALE, *The Book of Revelation*, 693–694; F. BLASS/A. DEBRUNNER/F. REHKOPF, *Grammatik*, § 215.1, note 2.

<sup>2</sup> A similar, but not identical formula is found in the seven letters in Rev 2–3 (2:7.11.17.29; 3:6.13.22). About the hearing formula in Revelation see W. POPKES, *Funktion*; A.-M. ENROTH, *Hearing Formula*.

authority. 3 And (I saw) one of its heads as slain to death, but its mortal wound had been healed.

*Reaction of the inhabitants of the earth (vv. 3b–4)*

And the whole earth wondered behind the beast. 4 And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'

*Description of the beast's power (vv. 5–7)*

5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering great and blasphemous words, and it was given power to act for forty two months. 6 And it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, (and) those who dwell in heaven. 7 And it was given to make war on the saints and to conquer them and it was given power over every tribe and people and language and nation.

*Reaction of the inhabitants of the earth (v. 8)*

8 And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

*Exhortation to endure (vv. 9–10)*

9 Let anyone who has an ear listen:

10 If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed.

Here is the endurance and the faith of the saints.<sup>3</sup>

This structuring of the vision indicates three main parts: on the one hand two different descriptions of the beast – of its appearance and of its power – and, on the other, an exhortation addressed directly to the congregations in Asia Minor to whom John writes his letter.<sup>4</sup>

In the first description (13:1–3a) the beast is connoted by two different categories of attributes. Some describe its grandeur, while others point out its threatening and negative character. Its huge appearance and the evident symbols of royal authority such as horns and diadems<sup>5</sup> demonstrate an enormous power. The allusion to a mortal wound that has been healed shows that this huge power participated in authority over death and life. Beside these fascinating attributes, the description of the beast also includes absolute negative connotations. It comes from the sea: this part of the creation is seen negatively, as a domain of uncontrolled, destructive forces.<sup>6</sup> The repetition of the number ten (ten horns, ten diadems) alludes to an incomplete form of power.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> I have altered the NRSV at some points to show the problems of the Greek text.

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting interpretation of Revelation as a letter see M. KARRER, *Johannesoffenbarung*.

<sup>5</sup> For more details see D. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI, *Täuschung*, 125–126.

<sup>6</sup> D. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI, *Täuschung*, 124–25. In the new creation described in Rev 21:1 the sea does not appear any more.

<sup>7</sup> The number ten can be understood symbolically as opposition to seven, which is always related to perfection. See U. VANNI, *L'Apocalisse*, 54. According to this interpretation the beast has seven heads – it is a 'perfect', fully monstrous monster – but has an incomplete power (ten horns, ten diadems).

names of the beast are blasphemous and proclaim its antagonism to God.<sup>8</sup> The beast is presented as a monster that looks like a leopard but with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's: the monstrous animal concentrates characteristics of very dangerous beings.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the aspect of danger and destruction is reiterated by the affirmation that the power of the beast originates entirely with the dragon.

Compared to the first, the second description of the beast (vv. 5–7) forms a climax. Here, the text focuses on the effects of the beast's power; again there is a list of asymmetrical features. On the one hand the negativity of this power is stressed: the beast speaks blasphemous words against God and his followers.<sup>10</sup> The sole aim of the beast's power is self-realisation; its results are destruction and death. But, on the other hand, its power is represented as a great apparition: the beast speaks great words and has absolute authority over the whole earth (every tribe and people and language and nation). The recurrence of passive forms in expressions like ἐδόθη αὐτῷ στόμα (v. 5), ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία ποιῆσαι (v. 5), ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ποιῆσαι (v. 7), ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία (v. 7) brings a theologically problematic twist into the text: if understood as *passiva divina*, they can be interpreted as a limitation of the huge power of the beast and of the dragon. This assumption is reinforced by the limitation of the negative power to 42 months.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, even when the power of the destructive forces is strictly controlled by God, it appears as absolute, without any restrictions on earth.

The reaction of the earth's inhabitants draws on this ambiguous character of the negative power. In the first description (vv. 3b–4), quoted at the beginning of this paper, it is said that the whole earth, without exception,<sup>12</sup> worships the beast. The direct question in v. 4 τίς ὅμοιος τῷ θηρίῳ καὶ τίς δύναται πολεμῆσαι μετ' αὐτοῦ; stresses that all the earth's inhabitants recognise the authority of the beast (and the dragon) as absolute.<sup>13</sup> In the second description (v. 8), however, there is a clear distinction between the followers of the beast

<sup>8</sup> βλασφημία is repeated several times in Rev 13:1–10. Within Revelation this word is used of personages that show and declare an identity that does not correspond to their true name (cf. Rev 2:9). The beast presents itself as a divine power although it is (for John) evident that there is only one divine power in the world, the power of God and its lamb.

<sup>9</sup> For the OT background see Dan 7:2–7; Hab 1:8; 2 Sam 17:8; Prov 17:12; Hos 13:7f. On the dependence of the description of the beast on Daniel see L.J. LIETAERT PEERBOLTE, *Antecedents*, 143ff.

<sup>10</sup> See above, note 8.

<sup>11</sup> The idea that the time of the beast and the dragon is limited is often repeated: see Rev 11:2 (42 months); 11:3; 12:6 (1260 days), i.e. three and a half years, i.e. the half of seven, the perfect number.

<sup>12</sup> S. SEESEMANN, *ὄλος*, 175–176.

<sup>13</sup> The vision of the beast is built as a parodistic parallelism to the vision of the lamb in Rev 5. In 5:2 a similar question is related to the lamb. Also the OT background (see as examples of parallel formulations Exod 15:11; Ps 89:7) emphasises the parodistic character of Rev 13:4.

and the followers of the Lamb:<sup>14</sup> the Christians, the victims of the beast, refuse to worship this destructive authority. In both passages, v. 3b–4 and v. 8, the adoration of the beast is described in typically religious terminology: the verb προσκυνέω is repeated several times.<sup>15</sup>

To summarise these observations: in the vision of the beast emerging from the sea there is an evolution, a dynamic description of the monstrous being. At the beginning, although it is clear that the beast belongs to the dragon, there are allusions to its imposing appearance, which justify the reaction of recognition and fascination by the inhabitants of the earth. The text introduces a sharp division between people worshipping the beast and the true followers of God and its lamb only after the presentation of the annihilating effects of the negative power.

The vision encompasses two different points of view. The inhabitants of the earth – including also the addressees of Revelation – look at the beast from a horizontal perspective: the greatness of the beast's power, who is even able to arise from death, can confuse even the Christians and induce them to accept its power. In contrast John, the seer, follows and describes the scene from a heavenly point of view. From this privileged perspective it is quite easy to recognise the clear contrast between the power of the beast and the power of God and its lamb.

Rev 13:9–10 interrupts the visionary character of the chapter: the narrative style is broken off by a direct exhortation to the readers. This last part of the text unit can be interpreted as an attempt to construct a coherent image of the discordant aspects of the power of the beast. Exhorting his addressees to endure the persecution caused from the destroying power, John admits on the one hand that the authority of the beast on earthly life is effective and absolute. In some cases it is not possible to escape prison or even a violent death. But on the other hand John encourages the followers of Christ to be patient<sup>16</sup> and to maintain the relationship with God in this time of suffering, since the power of the beast is in fact limited and represents only a terrible phase in God's plan which encompasses the whole world, from the first beginning until the new creation.

Many points I have briefly mentioned here become clearer within the context of the entire book of Revelation. For instance a comparison between Rev 13:1–10 and Rev 5 could point out many important details of the different quality of the beast's and the lamb's power. An accurate analysis of Rev 17–18 is necessary to fully understand how the negative forces and those co-operating with them are annihilated. A comparison of the letters to the seven congrega-

<sup>14</sup> The motif of the book where the names have been written since the foundation of the world is found also in Rev 17:8. To understand this motif a comparison with Rev 3:5 and 21:27 is important. See D. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI, *Täuschung*, 134–135.

<sup>15</sup> See H. GREEVEN, *προσκυνέω*, 759–767.

<sup>16</sup> ὑπομονή has an active meaning; see F. HAUCK, *ὑπομονή*, 585ff. According to Rev 1:9 ὑπομονή can be understood as the dimension where John's addressees experience the tension between persecution and salvation; see D. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI, *Täuschung*, 20ff.

tions in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3) to Rev 18 build the starting point for a reconstruction of the concrete manifestations of the negative power and the necessity for Christians to reject any kind of collaboration. The comparison between Rev 2–3 and 17–18 is also very important for understanding the urban dimension in which both the power of the beast and the divine power are acting. This list of topics can of course be further extended; for the purpose of this paper, however, we leave now the textual level and proceed to the question of its link to the historical context where it was written.

### On the Link Between Visions and Historical Context

In the visions of Revelation, destructive power and authority are often connected with theiomorphic beings such as the two beasts, the dragon, grasshoppers, and scorpions. There is no passage that explicitly relates these beings to a particular historical personage. Nevertheless it is fully clear that Revelation is written as a polemic and a condemnation of the Roman empire: the allusions and the employed imagery are quite evident even for modern readers.

However, any attempt to precisely relate the visions of Revelation to a particular personage in Roman history involves the use of accurate historical reconstruction and comparisons with extra-biblical documents. The text of Revelation itself operates on the level of allusion, and seems to resist a coherent identification with detailed historical facts.<sup>17</sup>

The fictional narration within the visions does not allow a precise identification: the images of Revelation are not conceived as allegories.<sup>18</sup> The link to the historical context is created differently; it is indicated by a different kind of markers such as 13:9, where the visionary narration is interrupted by a direct exhortation to the addressees. Another interesting example is found in Rev 17:7ff. At the sight of 'Babylon', presented as a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, John is greatly astonished. The following interpretation of the vision of this woman is introduced by the angel (Rev 17:7):

But the angel said to me, 'Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her'

The interpretation of the angel does not give a solution to the previous vision; it emphasises instead the necessity to interpret it. Also the very famous sentence in Rev 13:18 can be seen as such a link with the historical context:

Here is wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.

<sup>17</sup> The controversy about dating Revelation following the allusions to the beast's heads in 17:9–14 illustrate very well this point. See A. STROBEL, *Abfassung*, 433; J.H. ULRICHSEN, *Haupter*.

<sup>18</sup> For a possible definition of allegory see K. KOCH, *Visionsbericht*, 437: 'Denn Allegorie meint eine bildliche Rede, für die Substitution vorausgesetzt werden kann; was bildlich gesagt wird, kann in eigentliche unbildliche Rede transponiert werden'.

The exhortation to guess the meaning of 666 can be understood as an invitation to the reader to become an interpreter. It is necessary to identify the beast in history, but this identification must be performed by the Christians living in the seven Asian cities.<sup>19</sup> Avoiding an explicit identification of the beast in contemporary history, the visions of Revelation seem to aim at a more radical criticism, a rejection of every form of such a negative power.<sup>20</sup>

The link between the visions and their historical context is given through the mediation of the reader: the addressees of Revelation are exhorted to interpret history, to recognise the signs of the grandiose but destructive power and to distinguish it from the true power, the power of life, the authority of God and its Lamb. This dynamic between text and history motivates the addressees to read their daily life in the flourishing cities of Asia Minor from a theological point of view.<sup>21</sup>

### A Few Considerations on the Historical Background

As no comprehensive reconstruction of the historical background of Revelation can be attempted in this context, I only point out a few central points.<sup>22</sup>

Revelation was written towards the end of the reign of Domitian, that is, at the end of the first century C.E., in Asia Minor. Various non-biblical sources emphasise a negative image of this emperor, in particular toward the end of his reign. In this regard two elements in particular are often named: cruelty and religious ambitions. Also archaeological reconstruction reveals the wide presence of the emperor cult in the cities of the province of Asia. The religious centrality of the emperor is a fundamental aspect not only in the life of single Asian cities but also as a link between these flourishing but peripheral cities and the capital of the empire.

Although systematic repression of Christians is not attested for this time, membership in a Christian congregation may in some cases bring with it persecution. A further field of conflict lies in the necessity of the Christian to participate in the everyday life of the city (including also all the ceremonies and events related to the imperial cult) in order to pursue business.<sup>23</sup> Recent

studies on the historical background of Revelation emphasise the centrality of economical activities and trade, particularly with Rome, for the cities of the province of Asia. This explains in a very plausible way also the wide use of economic and trade semantics particularly in Rev 2–3; 13:11–18 and 17–18.<sup>24</sup>

### Between Fascination and Destruction

John, the seer, polemises against an attempt to mediate between the engagement in city life required by business and membership to the Christian community. He radically condemns any ambivalent attitude towards the fascination of power. Not all Christians refuse to fully participate in city life, which in John's eyes implies a general acceptance of the political-religious system. For them, however, the care of one's own business does not contradict membership in the Christian congregation and faith in God and Christ.<sup>25</sup> With the visions of the Apocalypse John depicts in a radical way the real quality, origin and effects of the authority on which the whole machinery is based.

Instead of a direct, polemical style, which is quite evident in the seven letters in Rev 2–3, Rev 13:1–10 expresses the necessity to resist the power of the beast and endure persecution through visionary means. Here the beast appears to all the inhabitants on earth as a fascinating, attractive power; nobody seems to be more powerful and great; nobody on earth can be compared with it. The beast and the dragon are presented as transcendent beings that require a religious adoration. But seen from heaven, from John's point of view, it is evident that whoever adores the beast does not really perceive the menace and perversion of such a power. Therefore, the strange grammatical construction quoted at the beginning, καὶ ἐθαυμάσθη ὅλη ἡ γῆ ὀπίσω τοῦ θηρίου, could be explained on a thematic level: the whole earth, adoring the beast, stands on the wrong side, the followers of the beast can not even see it straight on.

The description of the destructive power within Rev 13:1–10 aims to represent it in radical opposition to divine power, the transparent power of truth and life.<sup>26</sup> The narrative strategy in Rev 13:1–10, and I think in the whole series of visions, does not only aim to identify the negative power of the Roman empire, but it contains as well an exhortation to the addressees to interpret history, to recognise which power is really acting, to clearly discriminate life from death, salvation from perversion.

<sup>24</sup> See J.N. KRAYBILL, *Imperial Cult*.

<sup>25</sup> As an illustration see Rev 2:14.

<sup>26</sup> It can be of interest to observe that ὀπίσω is employed a few times within Revelation, in 1:10; 12:15 and 13:3. In the first two cases it can be translated as 'behind'. By contrast, the preposition with the opposite meaning, ἐνώπιον, is very frequent, and is used in the most cases in relation to God's and the Lamb's throne: the adoration of divine power is accomplished from face to face (see as examples Rev 4 and 5:8).

<sup>19</sup> For the questions about the number of the beast see A.Y. COLLINS, *Combat Myth*, 174–176; J.H. ULRICHSEN, *Häupter*, 4; M. OBERWEIS, *Bedeutung*; R. BAUCKHAM, *Climax*, 384ff.; H. ULLAND, *Vision*, 299–300.

<sup>20</sup> See F. BOVON, *Possession*, particularly 233.

<sup>21</sup> For this approach to Revelation cf. U. VANNI, *L'Apocalisse*, 63–72, and D. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI, *Täuschung*.

<sup>22</sup> To deepen this aspect see P. PRIGENT, *Temps*, 55; A.Y. COLLINS, *Crisis*; F. BOVON, *Possession*; K. WENGST, *Pax Romana*; P.J.J. BOTHA, *God*; P. LAMPE, *Christen*; L.L. THOMPSON, *Book of Revelation*; R. PETRAGLIO, *Obiezione*, 317ff.; R. BAUCKHAM, *Climax*, 338ff.; D. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI, *Täuschung*, 215–246.

<sup>23</sup> On the discussion of persecution under the reign of Domitian cf. H.-J. KLAUCK, *Send-schreiben*, 153–182; on the subjective perception of social exclusion cf. A.Y. COLLINS, *Persecution*.

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Michael Labahn / Jürgen Zangenberg  
(Hrsg.)

Daria e Valdo  
Pezzoli-Olgiati  
Tarl-Cippo 19  
6944 Cureglia

# Zwischen den Reichen: Neues Testament und Römische Herrschaft

Vorträge auf der Ersten Konferenz der  
European Association for Biblical Studies

Sonderdruck

**francke**  
**verlag**