

Apocalypse: Alternative Education

Supplemental Materials

The following two sets of supplemental material for chapter nine both use Revelation 13:1-4 to demonstrate their points.

Section one unpacks the cross-reference notes provided for this text in the outer margin of Nestle-Aland²⁷. The amount of information available in these notes is astonishing. Section one not only shows the value of these notes for any text in NA²⁷, but also shows how valuable they can be for understanding this particular text.

Users who do not read Greek should work through this exercise *in spite* of that! Knowledge of Greek will definitely enhance the value of these marginal notes, but they can be read—and can greatly benefit—any reader, Greek-savvy or not. In fact, even if you do not read Greek, you might consider purchasing a copy of NA²⁷ just for the sake of these outer-marginal references; they are well worth the price of the book!

The “unpacking” of the notes for Revelation 13:1-4 on the following pages “translates” the highly condensed abbreviations and symbols, since they can be puzzling until the user becomes accustomed to them. One of the problems English-speaking users encounter in them is that the references to Scripture are in typical German format: instead of a colon (or a period), these references use a comma; instead of a comma, they use a period. For example, the notation “Dn 7,3” means Daniel 7:3; the series of numbers “17,3.7.9.12.16” means Rev 17:3, 7, 9, 12 and 16. Cross-references to another place within the same book (in this case, Revelation) mention only the chapter and verse numbers; references to the same chapter (here, Rev 13) mention only the verse number(s).

A full description of the notation scheme used in these marginal references appears in NA²⁷, pp. 76*-79* of the introduction.

Section two provides some examples of handling the intensely symbolic nature of Revelation 13:1-4; they can serve as models for approaching other portions of the book—and the book as a whole, for that matter. The material in Section two will be more meaningful if you have already studied the material in Section one.

I. Using the NA²⁷ Outer-Marginal References: Revelation 13:1-4

13:1a

cf 11,7!

The exclamation mark signifies that a longer list of cross-references is found in the marginal reference at Rev 11:7; they are listed here in the following brackets: [=13,1; 17,8 Dn 7,3. The “cf” here and the corresponding question mark in front of 13,1—back at 11:7—imply that this cross-reference is of *doubtful relevance* to 13:1, and that 13:1 is of doubtful relevance to 11:7.]

Rev 11:7 refers to the beast that comes up *from the abyss* to make war against the two witnesses

Rev 17:8 the beast John saw is about to come up out of *the abyss* go to destruction

Dan 7:3 See below, next entry.

Dn 7,3

[=Dan 7:3]The four beasts Daniel sees in his vision come up *out of the sea*.

Is 27,1

[=Isa 27:1] “On that day,” the Lord will kill Leviathan, the dragon that is in *the sea*.

13:1b

17,3.7.9.12.16 [=Rev 17:3, 7, 9, 12, and 16] These texts provide multiple references to the scarlet beast with *seven heads and ten horns*, on which the whore of Babylon is sitting. They explain the seven heads as the seven hills on which the whore sits and as seven kings, some already gone; the ten horns are ten additional kings yet to come. They share the fate of the beast (v. 8).

Dn 7,7.24

[=Dan 7:7 and 24] Daniel’s fourth beast has *ten horns*, representing ten kings yet to come

13:1c

12,3

[=Rev 12:3] John sees another sign in the sky, a great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven *diadems* on his heads

13:2a

Dn 7,4-6

[=Dan 7:4-6] Daniel’s first three beasts resemble a *lion*, a *bear* and a *leopard*.

Hos 13,7s

[=Hosea 13:7-8] God himself, in response to Israel’s idolatry, will devour Israel as a *lion*, a *leopard* or a *bear* robbed of her cubs.

13:2b

2Th 2,8s

[=2 Thess 2:8-9] Paul predicts the “revelation” of the “lawless one” whom the Lord Jesus at his coming will annihilate with the breath of his mouth. This lawless one appears as a work of Satan, endowed with the *power* (δύναμις) of Satan for the working of signs and lying wonders.

2,13

[=Rev 2:13] The Risen One refers to the church of Pergamum as living where Satan’s *throne* (ὁ θρόνος τοῦ σατανᾶ) is, apparently the same throne that the dragon gives to the beast from the sea, in 13:2.

- 16,10 [=Rev 16:10] The fifth plagues angel pours his plague bowl out on the *throne of the beast*, plunging the beast's kingdom into darkness.
- 13:3a**
12.14 [=Rev 13:12, 14] These texts refer to the *slaughtered and revived head* of the first beast, the one which bears the plague of the sword yet “lived” (ἐζήσεν). The second beast (v. 11) forces humanity to worship the first beast.
- 13:3b**
17,8 [=Rev 17:8] Further reference to the inhabitants of the earth being *amazed* (θαυμασθήσονται) at the spectacle of the beast
- 13:4a**
8.12 [=Rev 13:8, 12] Further reference to the *worship* (προσκυνήσουσιν) of the (first) beast by the inhabitants of the earth
- 13:4b**
Ex 15,11 [=Ex 15:11] The rescued people of Israel rejoice at the crossing of the sea, praising God in the words, “Who is like you among gods, O Lord” (LXX: τίς ὁμοίός σοι ἐν θεοῖς, κύριε)
Ps 89,7 [=Ps 89:7 in Hebrew text *BHS* (see NA²⁷, p. 78*, par. 1); Ps 89:6 in NRSV; LXX Ps 88:7] “Who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord?” (τίς ἐν νεφέλαις ἰσωθήσεται τῷ κυρίῳ, καὶ τίς ὁμοιωθήσεται τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν υἱοῖς θεοῦ;)
- Note also: Ps 35[LXX 34]:10; 71[LXX 70]:19 κύριε / ὁ θεός, τίς ὁμοίός σοι;
Ps 113[LXX 112]:5 τίς ὡς κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν;
Jer 49:19[LXX 30:13]=50[LXX 27]:44 The Lord pronounces against Edom (chap. 49) and Babylon (chap. 50) τίς ὡσπερ ἐγώ; καὶ τίς ἀντιστήσεταιί μοι;
The Hebrew of the second question reads, “Who can *summon* me?” The LXX reading, “Who can stand against me?” may underlie the reading in Rev 3:4 τίς ὁμοίος τῷ θηρίῳ καὶ τίς δύναται πολεμῆσαι μετ’ αὐτοῦ; Interestingly enough, the beast in Revelation 13 represents “Babylon,” which Jer 50:44 also has in mind.

Some results of consulting the outer marginal notes in NA²⁷:

- We see the importance for this text of the beast-vision in Daniel 7.
- We are encouraged to connect the dots (so to speak) among the various references to the beasts in Revelation.

- We are encouraged to consider concordance studies of such terms as “the sea,” “worship,” “amaze,” “lion/leopard/bear,” “throne.”
- We are alerted to the implied mockery or blasphemy practiced by the beast, expressed in the parody of, or arrogation to himself of, praise ordinarily directed to God.
- This last item also suggests we do a concordance search of the phrase “who is like . . . ?”

II. Handling Apocalyptic Imagery: Revelation 13:1-4

Read Revelation 13:1-4 carefully in its context. List what you think would be the problems you would have to face if this were your assigned text for next Sunday's sermon.

Literary Issues:

1. How to approach apocalyptic literature
2. Series of seals, trumpets, woes, etc.
3. Revelation 12: war in heaven; the "woman and her child"
4. The dragon's attempt to destroy the woman's offspring (=Messiah) and then, failing that, the woman herself and her other offspring (=church)
5. 12:17 to the end (NA, v. 18): dragon stands on the seashore
6. Cf. 13:1 and 13:11
7. What is the second beast (cf. 13:11 [like a lamb, like a dragon], 13:13 [fire from Heaven image=Elijah directing worship to YHWH])? How does this help define the first beast (cf. Revelation 11)? What are they as a pair? [Beast 1: Roman Empire; Beast 2: perhaps a Roman legate enforcing emperor worship in Asia. Alternatively, Beast 1 is Nero, and Beast 2 those who encourage faith in his "return."]

Historical-Cultural Issues:

1. Significance of the sea, Leviathan, Behemoth (check a concordance: cf. Rev 21:1)
2. Ten horns, seven heads, ten crowns
3. Leopard, bear, lion; what is the prophetic reference? (Cf. Dan 7:4-6; originally Greece? But here the Roman Empire. Note also Hos 13:7-8; Isa 11:6-7.)
4. Slaughtered head alive again? (Rome recovered from revolution post Nero? Domitian? Nero redivivus? Parody of Christ?)
5. Allusion in v. 4 to Exodus 15:11, Psalm 89:6. (Note also Ps 35:10; 71:19; 113:5; Jer 49:19; 50:44.)

Interpretive Approaches:

So, how are we to interpret this?

- Preterist (solely focused on the original first-century setting)?
- Futurist (focused primarily on a particular future scenario)?
- Idealist (focused on abiding tendencies in human culture)?
- Historicist (focused on specific developments through the centuries, up to the present)?

What is the main issue for John in his day? How would this relate to your people's contemporary situation?

A Pan-historical View?

Without abandoning in any sense the immediate relevance of this text for the original readers, but without assuming that it necessarily has a specific "future" world scenario in mind, how else might we read Revelation 13:1-4, or indeed the entire book?

Two examples:

Two short but fascinating articles on this topic appear back-to-back in the autumn 2003 issue of *The Bible in Transmission*, a publication of the [British] Bible Society intended as "a forum for change in church and culture":

1. Ian Paul, "The End of Interpretation: Use and Misuse of the Book of Revelation," pp. 16-19
2. Christopher Rowland, "Unmasking Ideology," pp. 19-21

Ian Paul's article pleads for a judicious mixing of academic rigor and pastoral heart. Rowland's takes a modified idealist approach, anchored nonetheless in the original setting.

1. Ian Paul, "The End of Interpretation"

Ian Paul argues that readings of Revelation that result in the expectation of a pretribulation rapture of the church—as in the *Left Behind* series, for example—are actually misreadings. They fail to acknowledge two things about God that constitute a common assumption of all other Scripture (to which Revelation belongs as part of the canon): that God is the Creator of the world and that God is "other" than his creation.

- The assumption that God intends to destroy his creation does not take seriously his commitment to it. It is significant that the Noachic rainbow appears over his throne in Revelation 4:3 (cf. 10:1). [This would mean that the new earth (Rev 21:1) is "merely" the old earth repaired and restored. We have to be wary, however, of over-interpreting metaphorical language, even here.]
- The assumption that we can legitimately interpret this ancient text in terms of our own experience and expectations denies the "otherness" of Scripture and of God himself. Rather we should *expect* the text to confront us as aliens to God's way of looking at the world and not to affirm us in our comfort zones. By ignoring the ancient "otherness" of the original text and its setting, we actually approach a "reader-response" hermeneutic, where we cut ourselves off from the ancient setting and focus solely on our own as the key to the meaning of the text.

Paul then proposes three issues that frequently stand in the way of our reading Revelation rightly:

- We do not understand the genre, because we no longer use it in our culture. Consider the following:
*The stars will fall from heaven,
the sun will cease its shining;
the moon will be turned to blood,
and fire and hail will fall from heaven.
Meanwhile the south Sound area will have scattered showers
with occasional sun-breaks.*
- We misread metaphorical language, thinking either that it is easily translatable into propositional speech (referring to things within our ken) or that it to be taken literally. In fact, it is metaphorical, and not literal, precisely because it refers to reality beyond our ken.
- Our readings are either irresponsibly popular/devotional or they are irrelevantly academic. We need to be responsibly devotional, relevantly academic.

2. Christopher Rowland, “Unmasking Ideology”

Rowland is concerned that Revelation is misread when we too easily—or too exclusively—link it to “the end of time.” In spite of its metaphorical language about a cataclysmic destruction of the world, it is not so much about that as it is a means of insight and revelation into human life now or at any other point in history. It is a lens through which to view every age of human existence.

To explain what he means, he refers to a book by William Stringfellow titled *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1973). Stringfellow’s purpose is to encourage North Americans to interpret the United States in light of the Bible rather than interpreting the Bible in light of the United States.

He carries this out by proposing that the Book of Revelation is a “parable of the fallenness of nations.” Thus:

- *Babylon* (14:8 etc.) represents every city, every empire, and is an allegory of the condition of death.
- *Jerusalem* (in particular, the *new* Jerusalem, 3:12; 21:2) represents the prophetic people of God, emancipated from the rule of death, and an anticipation of the restoration of all things.
- *Antichrist* represents the idolatry of death in a nation, mimicking and displacing Christ, converting church institutions into functionaries of the state.
- *Christ’s crucifixion* epitomizes the injustice of the state, but one that God overrules, forming a new international race of people gathered around the slain and risen Lord and creating a new kind of politics.

Applying this approach to Revelation 13, Rowland makes the following suggestions:

- The connection to Daniel 7 and the vision of the four beasts leads us to see the beast in 13:1 as representing a state, a national power. He speculates that the beast from the sea is Rome (perhaps an imperial official has recently arrived by sea) and that the beast from the land is a local official (the Roman legate of Asia?) charged with forcing the inhabitants to worship the first beast.
- The first beast is an incarnation of the power of a demonic, dehumanizing empire, appearing to deserve worship (like the Lamb), but for its power and prestige.
- Readers of Revelation, however, see all this from God's point of view. God cares for the nobodies and the oppressed. The apparent success of the state is doomed to destruction.
- Thus through these bizarre and violent images we are enabled over and over again to recognize the shallow emptiness, the vain and temporary nature of what we otherwise regard as "obvious," "common sense," and "normal." We are enabled to unmask ideologies.

But Rowland recognizes that this is only one way of reading Revelation. Its allusive, metaphorical nature means that no one interpretive approach can claim to be definitive; no clear single way of reading Revelation jumps out at us.