

A Case for the Beast as Israel and the Zealots

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A KEY PART OF what John wanted to communicate to his first-century readers concerned the beast, with more space given to this topic than to the harlot, the two witnesses, New Jerusalem, and other notable eschatological themes. John warned that some of his contemporaries would worship the beast and receive God's wrath and fiery torment (Rev 14:9-11), while others would overcome the beast and stand on the sea of glass and sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (Rev 15:2-4). So there's no doubt that the beast was a great enemy to the church, but who was this enemy?

Not long after I embraced fulfilled eschatology in 2009, I also embraced the view that the beast was Nero and the Roman Empire. After all, Apollonius of Tyana (AD 15-98) referred to Nero as "a beast." After all, using Hebrew gematria a form of Nero's name, "Nrwn Qsr," is said to equal "666." After all, Nero persecuted Christians.

As time went on, though, I realized that I couldn't reconcile the Rome/Nero model of the beast with several passages in Daniel and Revelation. I decided it was time to restudy and reconsider this topic.

I'd like to highlight, in summary form, eight pieces of evidence which I believe show that the beast was Israel, and in particular the Zealot movement which captured the loyalty of so many Jews in the first century.

A Summary of Evidence that the Beast Was Israel

1. Revelation 11 states that the beast would kill the two witnesses (v. 7) in Jerusalem (v. 8), and in that same hour an earthquake would kill 7,000 people (v. 13). Josephus describes an earthquake which took place in early AD 68 (*Wars* 4.4.5). That same night an army of Idumeans, hired by the Zealots, went on a murderous rampage. The next morning 8,500 dead bodies were found (*Wars* 4.5.1). Ananus and Jesus, two former high priests, were not allowed to be buried (Rev 11:9; *Wars* 4.5.2). Who could have killed the two witnesses when that earthquake took place in Jerusalem? From November AD 66 to April AD 70, Jerusalem was fully controlled by the Zealots; the Romans were not there.¹

2. In Revelation 13:4 those who worshipped the beast proclaimed, "Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?" Judah Maccabee is said to have carried the following expression on his standard in battle around 165 BC: "Who is like unto thee among the mighty, O Lord!?" This expression is strikingly

similar to the wording of Revelation 13:4, which very well could have been said about the Zealots when they slaughtered the Roman garrisons at Masada and Jerusalem (*Wars* 2.17) and surprisingly defeated the armies of Cestius Gallus in November AD 66 (*Wars* 2.19). Historians have noted that the Zealots intended to once again make Israel fully independent just like the Maccabees did.²

3. Revelation 13 depicts a second beast, later called “the false prophet,” working closely with the first beast and performing signs and wonders. Josephus repeatedly spoke of false prophets working closely with the Zealots (e.g. *Wars* 6.5.2), promoting their war agenda (e.g. *Wars* 2.13.4-6), and claiming to perform signs and wonders (e.g. *Antiquities* 20.8.6; *Wars* 7.11.1).

4. The fifth bowl judgment (Rev 16:10) was poured out “on the throne of the beast,” resulting in darkness, sores, and pain throughout his kingdom. In Leviticus 26:18-28 God repeatedly warned Israel that they would one day be punished “seven times”³ for their sins, as God would execute the vengeance of His covenant (v. 25). It’s no coincidence that the covenant imagery of Mount Sinai (Exod 19) appears in the opening of the seventh seal, the sounding of the seventh trumpet, and the pouring out of the seventh bowl.⁴ **Those seven-fold judgments were reserved for Israel alone.** So it follows that when the fifth bowl judgment was poured out “on the throne of the beast,” it was Israel, not Rome, which was the kingdom of the beast and experienced that darkness and pain.

5. Revelation 16:13-14 describes the dragon, beast, and false prophet working together to gather a multitude to a great battle. Josephus described how the Zealots and false prophets worked together to compel the people of Israel to go to war against Rome, killing and torturing those who resisted their agenda (e.g. *Wars* 5.1.5, 5.8.1, and 6.5.2).

6. In Revelation 17:16, John was told that the 10 horns of the beast would make the harlot desolate, eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. Ten Jewish generals were appointed to oversee the war effort in December AD 66 (*Wars* 2.20.3-4).⁵ Josephus blamed the Zealots for the destruction of Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple (e.g. *Wars* 4.6.3, 5.1.1, 5.1.5, and 5.6.1). He blamed them for the fire that consumed the temple (e.g. *Wars* 5.1.4, 5.4.4, 6.2.9, 6.4.5, 6.6.2). He even referred to them as a wild beast eating its own flesh (*Wars* 5.1.1; compare with *Wars* 4.9.8; *Wars* 4.4.3; 1 Cor 15:32; 2 Peter 2:1, 12; and Jude 10).

7. In Revelation 19:19-20, it’s stated that at the coming of Christ the beast would be captured and cast into the lake of fire. This did not happen to either Nero or Rome in the first century, but it did happen to the Zealot leaders of Israel, thus fulfilling Revelation 13:10 (“*He who leads into captivity must go into captivity . . .*”). For example, two Zealot leaders, responsible for taking many people captive, met the following fate: John Levi of Gischala was taken captive by the Romans and “condemned to perpetual imprisonment” (*Wars* 6.9.4) and Simon Bar Giora was captured, paraded, tormented, and executed (*Wars* 7.2.2 and 7.5.1-7).

8. In Matthew 21:43-45 Jesus stunned the religious leaders of Israel by declaring that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and given to another nation. His statement sourced prophetic passages in Daniel 2 and 7 about the transition from the fourth kingdom to the everlasting kingdom of God. Let's compare these passages, taking note of the parallels (A, B, C, D, and E):

*“Therefore I say to you, [A] **the kingdom** of God will be taken from you and [B] **given to a nation bearing the fruits of it**. And whoever falls on [C] **this stone** will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it [D] **will grind him to powder**. Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that [E] **He was speaking of them**”* (Matt 21:43-45 NKJV).

*“You watched while [C] **a stone** was cut out without hands, which [D] **struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces**. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were [D] **crushed together**, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And [C] **the stone** that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. . . . And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up [A] **a kingdom which shall never be destroyed . . .**”* (Dan 2:34-35, 44 NKJV).

*“The fourth beast shall be [E] **a fourth kingdom on earth**, which shall be different from all other kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, trample it and break it in pieces, . . . Then [A] **the kingdom and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be [B] given to the people, the saints of the Most High**. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom . . .”* (Dan 7:23, 27 NKJV).

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the legs and feet were the fourth kingdom (Dan 2:33, 40). The head was Babylon (v. 38) and the feet were the final stage. When the stone struck the feet, they shattered, the statue was crushed (vv. 34-35, 44-45), and the kingdom of God was set up (vv. 35, 44).

In Matthew 21, who did Jesus identify as the “feet of iron and clay” that would soon be crushed by the stone? Didn't Jesus portray Israel, not Rome, as the entity which would be destroyed when the kingdom was taken from them and given to the saints? Rome was neither crushed nor in its final stage when the saints received the kingdom, but Israel was crushed.

The fourth beast of Daniel 7 was a fourth kingdom (vv. 7, 17, 23) and the beast in the book of Revelation. Daniel watched as the “*beast was **slain**, and its body **destroyed and given to the burning flame***” (v. 11). This was not Rome's fate, but Israel was destroyed, and Jerusalem was burned (Matt 22:7; Rev 18:9, 18).

For more details about the beast from this perspective, my ongoing series on the beast can be found at the following link: adammaarschalk.com/beast-of-revelation/. †

¹ For more details, see adammaarschalk.com/2017/02/04/the-two-witnesses-killed-by-the-beast-revelation-113-13/.

² For more details, see adammaarschalk.com/2017/07/14/who-can-make-war-with-the-beast-revelation-134.

³ For more on the significance of “seven” in Revelation, see adammaarschalk.com/2016/08/01/the-significance-of-the-number-7-in-the-book-of-revelation.

⁴ For more details, see adammaarschalk.com/2014/03/25/echoes-of-mount-sinai-in-the-book-of-revelation.

⁵ For more details, see adammaarschalk.com/2016/07/11/josephus-lists-the-10-horns-who-received-authority-for-one-hour-revelation-1712/.