1 The Iconography of Evil in Revelation: from Seven Heads to Ten Horns

1.1 Abstract

This study is an exhaustive exegetical-theological analysis of the central images of the Beast in the Apocalypse of St. John — with particular attention to chapters 12, 13 and 17 — in their deep intertextual relation to the visions of the Book of Daniel (Dan 7). Maintaining rigorous methodological caution at the intersection of historical-literary criticism and Catholic theological hermeneutics, the article distinguishes four fundamental analytical fields: (a) the original Roman context, the socio-political conditions of Asia Minor and the local imperial cult; (b) the literary and symbolic-typological work of the apocalyptic text in light of the Old Testament matrix of Daniel; (c) the narrative and theological internal relations between Rev 12, 13 and 17; and (d) the transhistorical theological reception of this material from a strictly christocentric and ecclesiological perspective. The study treats exhaustively: the significance of the seven heads and seven diadems (διάδημα), the ten horns, the blasphemous names (ὀνόματα βλασφημίας), the semantics of the sea as the space of untamed chaos, the dynamics of the dragon, the Beast from the sea and the Beast from the earth (the False Prophet), as well as the economic and religious dimension of the Beast's mark (χάραγμα). The whole reflection is framed by the theology of the Lamb's victory as absolute counter-sovereignty against the usurpatory claims of empire. The investigation preserves strict hermeneutical rigor: it categorically rejects identifying the Beast with specific figures of the contemporary political scene, avoids any prognostic speculation or date-setting, and opposes reducing political power to an inherently demonic reality, indicating only its susceptibility to idolatrous distortions.

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1.3 Introduction

Apocalyptic literature, arising from the deep stream of biblical prophecy, uses symbol, vision, and complex imagery as its primary, rigorous theological language. Contrary to popular fundamentalist abuses, these images do not function as simple "ciphers" or cryptograms designating one specific person from a distant future. Rather, they are multi-layered compressions of historical experiences, biblical memory and mythological catalogues, which serve to express precisely the theological, political and ethical crisis experienced by the believing community. This study develops a thorough interpretation of the motifs of the seven heads and the ten horns, showing how the Apocalypse of St. John combines exemplary, Old Testament motifs from the Book of Daniel with the very concrete, tangible experience of early Christian communities in Asia Minor, living under the pressure of the Roman Empire and its institutionalized cult. A coherent, Catholic understanding of these apocalyptic images requires the application of three simultaneous research perspectives. First, historical-literary accuracy is necessary to situate the text in its original environment (Sitz im Leben), recognizing the realities of Roman domination and local mechanisms of power. Second, sensitivity to the typological function of Danielic motifs is required; John does not

mechanically copy the past but uses it as a matrix for reading present and future. Third, and most importantly, a christological hermeneutic is required, which reads the entire structure of evil exclusively in the light of the Lamb's sacrifice, resurrection and final reign. In this perspective, political power is never evil by its nature — as an element of created order — but it has a tragic capacity for idolatrous degeneration when it usurps prerogatives belonging only to God.

1.4 I. Daniel as an intertextual key

1.4.1 1. The sea as an image of historical chaos

In the biblical tradition the sea (gr. θάλασσα, thalassa; Heb. יָם, yam) is a thoroughly polyvalent space. It denotes both a concrete geographic body of water and — in a much deeper theological sense — the cosmic sphere of disorder, primeval chaos and rebellion, from which monsters and existential threats to God's people emerge. In Dan 7:2–3 the image in which "the winds of heaven stirred up the Great Sea" and from which four beasts come forth creates a fundamental conceptual framework. The political history of nations and empires is presented not as rational development but as a series of violent, irrational eruptions of chaos. John of Patmos fully inherits this theological framing: the Beast "from the sea" (ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον; Rev 13:1) appears not as the embodiment of a specific coast or sea route (although Rome reached Asia Minor via the Mediterranean), but as a symbolic breach of that chaos from which institutionalized violence emerges.

In the apocalyptic interpretation, the "sea" therefore does not describe the geographical origin of the Roman Empire (though Rome reached Asia Minor through the Mediterranean), but its symbolic, destructive mode of operation. The sea is here the antithesis of God's created order (Gen 1). The empire, arising from the sea, appears as a force of destruction that transforms a harmonious social order into an oppressive system of violence and exploitation. That is why, in the eschatological vision of the new creation in Rev 21:1 John categorically states: "and the sea is no more" (καὶ ἡ θάλασσα οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι). This is not a forecast of oceans drying up, but a theological declaration that in God's final kingdom there will be no place for chaos, rebellion and empires that generate violence.[1]

Methodologically and ecclesiologically, reading the sea as chaos protects exegesis from the trap of literalism. Attempts to identify the "sea" with specific contemporary geopolitical organizations or nations are a categorical error. The Church, reading this text, is called to recognize the mechanisms of chaos in every historical epoch. Political power, when detached from natural law and God's design, always "reverts" to a sea-state of chaos, becoming a threat to human dignity and the freedom of Christian witness.

1.4.2 2. The synthesis of Daniel's four beasts in the apocalyptic image

In Daniel 7 four beasts appear sequentially on the stage of history: a lion with eagle's wings, a bear, a leopard with four heads and a terrifying monster with iron teeth and ten horns. In Jewish tradition these symbolized successive empires oppressing God's people (Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece). The Apocalypse of St. John in Rev 13:2 performs, however, a brilliant literary and theological maneuver. John speaks of a single Beast possessing the features of all these animals: "it was like a leopard, and its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth like a lion's mouth." The inspired author does not copy Daniel mechanically but

[1] Cf. detailed exegesis of the sea motif as chaos in: John J. Collins, Daniel; Craig R. Koester, Revelation; and syntheses discussed in the classic commentary literature.

effects a deep synthesis of motifs, creating a monstrous hybrid. It is meant to show the continuum of institutionalized oppression and the accumulation of evil in one system.

John's representation is chronologically inverted with respect to Daniel's vision (leopard, bear, lion). This literary move suggests that John, looking from the perspective of the first century, sees in Rome an actualization and sum of the whole series of earlier empires. The Beast of Revelation is a historical and theological culmination of the pride, cruelty and idolatry of all preceding powers. Such a typological technique allows John to speak at once about the very concrete experiences of the communities in Asia Minor (oppression by Rome) and about universal mechanisms of imperial violence that transcend the first century.[2]

For Christology and the theology of history this means that political evil is not an isolated phenomenon but has its dark tradition and continuity. The Beast from the sea inherits the "achievements" of its predecessors in the art of oppression. At the same time, through this synthesis, John shows that the ultimate confrontation is not only with a local Roman official but with the whole might of historical rebellion against God. Methodologically this requires us to avoid reductionism: the Beast is Rome in John's time, but Rome understood as the incarnation of a timeless paradigm of idolatrous statehood, which opens the text to applications in later eras of the Church's life.

1.4.3 3. Models of reading Daniel's fourth kingdom

In biblical and intertestamental literature there exist various, evolving reconstructions of Daniel's "fourth kingdom." In the original historical context of the Book of Daniel (2nd century BCE) the fourth and most terrifying beast referred to the Hellenistic empire, and its "little horn" symbolized Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the persecutor of the Jews and profaner of the Temple. However, over time, in Jewish traditional readings (e.g., 4 Ezra) and in early Christian ones, this vision began to be reinterpreted and to be applied to a new, contemporary oppressor — the Roman Empire. John of Patmos participates in this living reception of the inspired text. He does not engage in historiography of Daniel in the sense of a modern, closed antiquarian analysis.

Instead, John's re-reading of Daniel serves as a potent typological matrix. The motif of the four beasts, and in particular the fourth monster with ten horns, is used as a pattern (type) of the mechanism of persecution. Such a reading brings together the authority and testimony of biblical memory with a sharp diagnosis of the present political situation of the Christian community. John is telling his readers: what happened in Antiochus's time is happening now under Rome, because the nature of idolatrous power remains unchanged.[3]

From the perspective of Catholic exegesis, this model of reading is fundamentally important for rejecting contemporary interpretive errors (such as dispensationalism). Revelation is not a ciphered calendar of 21st-century events. It is rather a theological diagnosis that teaches the Church to recognize the "fourth kingdom" in any totalitarian system that claims absolute dominion over human consciences. The methodological limitation here is the prohibition on attributing the features of the Beast to specific contemporary political figures in an exclusive and definitive manner; the Beast is a paradigm, not an individual prediction.

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[2] See the analysis of the synthesis of the beasts in: David E. Aune, Revelation 6–16; Mark S. Smith, The Ugaritic Baal Cycle; Michael Segal, "Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts".

[3] Cf. broad discussions on the reception of Daniel in biblical literature and the evolution of interpretations of the fourth kingdom reconstructed by John J. Collins and Michael Segal.

1.5 II. The structure of the three monsters: Rev 12, 13 and 17 — internal relations

1.5.1 4. Scheme: dragon — beast from the sea — beast from the earth

The most constitutive and complex iconographic arrangement in the central part of Revelation is the triad of figures: the dragon (ὁ δράκων; Rev 12), the Beast from the sea (τὸ θηρίον ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης; Rev 13:1) and the Beast from the earth (τὸ θηρίον ἐκ τῆς γῆς; Rev 13:11), which in later parts of the book John unequivocally names the False Prophet (Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). This set is not a collection of accidental images but functions like a precisely woven network of dependencies. The dragon (identified as Satan and the devil) is the primordial source, inspirer and patron of the rebellion. The Beast from the sea constitutes the historical incarnation of political institutionalism, military power and oppression. The Beast from the earth organizes cult, constructs propaganda and assumes the role of ideological legitimation of the system. Chapter 17 of Revelation reinterprets and expands elements of this triad, integrating the image of the Woman (the Harlot) and the scarlet Beast into the frame of "Babylon." This literary move allows John to combine political critique of the empire with a critique of its destructive economic force and cultural seductiveness. The relations among these images should be understood as dynamic narrative transitions. The dragon, defeated in heaven (Rev 12:7–9), stands on the sand of the sea and gives to the Beast from the sea his power, his throne, and great authority (Rev 13:2). The second Beast, for its part, lacks its own military power but acts on behalf of the first, forcing the inhabitants of the earth to worship it (Rev 13:12).[4] For Christian ecclesiology this scheme is highly instructive. It shows that persecution of the Church is rarely the result solely of brute physical force (the Beast from the sea). It normally requires the support of an ideological, cultural, or media apparatus (the Beast from the earth) that rationalizes evil and makes it socially acceptable. Methodologically, analysis of these three figures requires treating them as an inseparable system; reducing evil in Revelation exclusively to the political dimension (neglecting the dragon's spiritual inspiration and the False Prophet's propaganda) impoverishes the book's theological message.

1.5.2 5. The apocalyptic "trinity" of evil and its asymmetry

Revelation thus forms a threefold structure of evil, which in theological tradition is often and rightly called a demonic parody of God's order (the so-called "unholy trinity"). In this caricature the dragon appears as the "source" of power (parodying the role of God the Father), the Beast from the sea, which received a mortal wound and yet lived, arrogates royal dignity (parodying the death and resurrection of the Son of God, the Lamb), and the Beast from the earth creates rites, signs and propaganda oriented toward worship of the first Beast (parodying the action of the Holy Spirit who leads to truth and the glorification of Christ). It is extremely important, however, that Catholic exegesis emphasizes the asymmetry of this image with all force. Revelation does not describe any alternative "trinity" that would be ontologically equivalent to God (which would lead to Manichaean or Gnostic dualism). It is only a system of pathological dependencies and instrumentalizations. The dragon initiates the rebellion, while the Beast and the False Prophet act as tools of its frustration after being cast out of heaven. Evil in John's vision is not an autonomous absolute; it

[4] See synthetic remarks concerning the narrative structure in: David E. Aune, and the chapters devoted to Rev 12–13 in the fundamental works of Koester and Beale.

is a parasitic distortion of good, a privation of the good (privatio boni), which can only imitate and destroy what God created as good.[5]

This theological asymmetry has fundamental importance for Christian ethics and hope. Because evil is merely a parody, its time is intrinsically limited and counted. Political power, even in its most demonic, totalitarian form, remains within God's permissive plan. The Christian therefore does not fight a power equal to God but an usurper whose ultimate defeat has already been accomplished in the paschal mystery of Christ. Any private, magical or exorcistic applications of these texts that ascribe to evil the status of an omnipotent force are deeply contrary to the spirit of Revelation.

1.6 Orientation iconographic table

Figure (Revelation)	Heads	Horns	Diadems (διάδημα)	Literary and theological function	Biblical references
The dragon	7	10	7 diadems on the heads	source of rebellion, initiator of persecution; meta-power, parody of the Father	Rev 12:3–4; 12:9–10
The Beast from the sea	7	10	10 diadems on the horns; ὀνόματα βλασφημίας on the heads	embodiment of the imperial system, institutionalization of violence	Rev 13:1–10; Rev 17:3–8
The Beast from the earth (the False Prophet)	—	2	none	cultic and propagandistic apparatus; creates the image and mark of the Beast	Rev 13:11–18; Rev 16:13; 19:20
The Beast of Rev 17 (the Woman + the Beast)	7	10	—	political-economic interpretation of "Babylon";	Rev 17:1–18

[5]Cf. the concept of demonic parody in: Adela Yarbro Collins, The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation, and Richard Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy.

Figure (Revelation)	Heads	Horns	Diadems (διάδημα)	Literary and theological function	Biblical references
				royal alliances	

The above table clearly emphasizes the recurrent iconography (seven heads and ten horns), while drawing attention to highly significant shifts of insignia (diadems) and functions, which will be analyzed in detail in subsequent sections.

1.7 III. Seven heads: identity, topography and fullness of power

1.7.1 6. The head as a symbol of authority

In the broadly understood tradition of the ancient Near East and in biblical literature the "head" (gr. κεφαλή, kephalē) denotes the principal axis of identity, authority and power. In biblical contexts "head" can indicate leadership, military dominance or the focal point of a nation's political personality. In the Apocalypse of St. John the motif of the seven heads of the Beast is intentionally recorded in an ambiguous manner. The angel explaining the vision in chapter 17 states that the seven heads are "seven hills" (τοὺς ἑπτὰ λόφους; Rev 17:9), on which the Woman sits, and at the same time "seven kings" (ἑπτὰ βασιλεῖς; Rev 17:10). John masterfully weaves here the topographical image of Rome — widely known in antiquity as urbs septicollis, "the city of seven hills" — with a scheme of historical succession of rulers.

He thus creates a symbol that contains both concrete topography (pointing to the capital of the then-empire) and political history. The number seven, which in Jewish and Christian apocalypticism is a sacred number of fullness, perfection and completeness, functions here as a sign of absolute power. But in the case of the Beast it is usurping fullness, a blasphemous claim to comprehensive, divine domination over the world. The Beast claims the right to be the ultimate authority, thus replacing God as the only true "Head" of creation.

From the point of view of political theology this double image (hills and kings) shows that idolatrous power always has a spatial dimension (institutions, capitals, decision centers) and a personal one (concrete leaders, dynasties). The Church is called to demystify both dimensions. Methodologically, it would be an error to reduce the seven heads solely to the geography of Rome while ignoring the dynamics of royal power, and vice versa — to focus only on rulers while omitting the institutional center of the empire.

1.7.2 7. Seven heads: city, succession and symbol of fullness

Exegetical debates about whether the seven heads of Rev 17:10 ("five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come") constitute a concrete historical list of seven Roman emperors are older than modern historical criticism itself. Attempts have been made to begin enumerations from Julius Caesar, Augustus, and to omit the so-called year-of-the-four-emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) to fit "the one who is" to Nero, Vespasian or Domitian. John, however, uses this image not to offer his readers a chronicle or a mathematical puzzle. His aim is to show the continuity and inevitability of the mechanism of power.

In Rev 17:9–11 the angel himself interprets the symbol: some of the rulers "have fallen," the present system endures, and another "is yet to come and will remain for a little while." Such a multi-layered, symbolic interpretation allows John to speak of the dynamics of succession that do not break the essence of the Beast. Power changes, faces on coins are replaced, but the oppressive system remains the same. The seven heads are thus a synthetic metaphor of the historical fullness of imperial power. Yet it is a fullness that, in God's plan, is already judged and will ultimately be surpassed and destroyed by God's sovereignty.[6]

For Christian witness (martyrdom) a profound ethical lesson follows. The faithful should not place hope in mere change of political leaders ("another head") if the system itself remains idolatrous. On the other hand, the awareness that the eighth king "goes to destruction" (Rev 17:11) protects against despair. Thus we reject all sensational contemporary attempts to ascribe those heads to today's presidents or political alliances. This text is a theological reflection on the nature of succession of power, not a cryptogram for guessing the future.

1.8 IV. Ten horns: the executive power of empire

1.8.1 8. Horn as a sign of might

The symbolism of the horn (gr. κέρας, keras) derives directly from the pastoral and agrarian experience of the ancient Near East, where an animal's horn (of an ox, ram) indicated its vital strength, ability to defend and to prevail in combat. In the prophetic poetry and literature of the Bible the "horn" is often a common metaphor for national, military or royal power (cf. Ps 89:18; 92:11 — the desire to "lift up the horn" as a metaphor of triumph and God's blessing). In the vision of Dan 7:24 the horns on the head of the fourth beast represent "ten kings" (δέκα κέρατα), which provides a direct interpretive model for John.

In Revelation the horn thus transforms from a universal, poetic image of strength into a very concrete political designatum: it signifies a king, a vassal state, a province or an executive institution of the empire. In Rev 17:12 John explicitly, through the angel, interprets the ten horns as ten kings who "have not yet received a kingdom" (οἵτινες βασιλείαν οὔπω ἔλαβον), but are to receive authority "for one hour" (μίαν ὥραν) together with the Beast. The number ten, like seven, has symbolic character — indicating the full, complete number of allies, the human fullness of military and political forces concentrated around a single aim.

Theologically, a horn in service of the Beast is an image of strength detached from service to the common good and subordinated to destruction. Executive power, instead of protecting the weak (a classic biblical task of a king), becomes an instrument of oppression. Methodologically, Catholic exegesis avoids identifying these ten horns with ten contemporary states of Europe or the world (a popular view in some Protestant currents of the twentieth century). They are rather an image of a widespread coalition of political forces which in a given historical moment choose to collaborate with an anti-God system.

1.8.2 9. Ten horns in Rev 17: political consequences and coalitions

In Rev 17 the ten horns appear in an especially interesting, dynamic context of alliance. These kings receive power briefly and "they have one mind, and they give their power and authority to the Beast" (Rev 17:13). This precisely illustrates the mechanics of imperial cooperation: local centers of power, client kings, provincial governors voluntarily accept and reinforce central Roman domination in exchange

[6] Cf. exegetical commentaries on Rev 17:9–11 and the problem of imperial succession in the literature (Aune; Beale).

for participation in benefits and maintenance of their own — if temporary — positions. Moreover, in a paradoxical turn, those same horns ultimately "will hate the Harlot and make her desolate and naked" (Rev 17:16), which shows the self-destructive nature of evil that ultimately devours itself.

For the Christian communities to whom John wrote, this has very concrete and painful political and social implications. Exclusion, marginalization and violence against the faithful were not exercised solely by the emperor in distant Rome. They required the cooperation of an entire network of structures — from the Roman military, through provincial administration (proconsuls), to local city leaders and councils (boulai). The ten horns show how imperial hegemony is in reality a dense network of execution of power, not a homogeneous monolith.

From the standpoint of Christian ethics, this image teaches that systemic evil relies on compromises and coalitions of local elites. The state and its structures are not demonic by nature, but become so when local decision-makers (horns) surrender their sovereignty and conscience in the service of the idolatrous ideology (the Beast). The Church is therefore called to prophetic critique not only of central power centers but also of local mechanisms of conformity that enable persecution of truth.

1.9 V. Diadems, ὀνόματα βλασφημίας and the shifting of insignia

1.9.1 10. διάδημα vs στέφανος: a semantic distinction

Understanding the iconography of power in Revelation requires precise philological analysis. The Greek language has two different terms for head-coverings associated with glory or authority, and John of Patmos uses them with remarkable theological precision. The first is διάδημα (diadēma) — a royal band, diadem, which in the Hellenistic world and the East was the absolute symbol of sovereignty, monarchical power and the claim to political rule. The second is στέφανος (stephanos) — a wreath (often laurel or oak), which was the victor's reward, a sign of triumph, joy and also eschatological reward.

Revelation reserves the term διάδημα almost exclusively for descriptions of forces of evil: the dragon (Rev 12:3) and the Beast from the sea (Rev 13:1), and finally, in an act of triumph, assigns "many diadems" to the returning Christ (Rev 19:12). Conversely, στέφανος is attributed to those who receive glory and reward from God: the Woman clothed with the sun (Rev 12:1), the twenty-four Elders (Rev 4:4), and also to faithful Christians as the "crown of life" (Rev 2:10). This distinction has colossal theological consequences.[7]

The diadem (διάδημα) on the heads of monsters indicates a claim to kingship that results from usurpation, pride and violence. It is a power that the monsters assign to themselves or confer among themselves. The crown (στέφανος), on the other hand, is the sign of true, bestowed glory connected with fidelity, martyrdom and participation in Christ's paschal victory. Political power that clamors for diadems sets itself up as a deity; the Church seeks the crown that is a gift of grace.

1.9.2 11. The shifting of diadems: from the dragon's heads to the Beast's horns

A highly significant, often overlooked narrative detail in Revelation is the location of those diadems. In the vision of Rev 12:3 the great red dragon has seven heads and ten horns, and "on his heads were seven diadems" (ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτοῦ ἑπτὰ διαδήματα). This image shows the dragon's primordial claim to spiritual sovereignty over the world; the diadems on the heads indicate that he considers himself the

[7] On the crucial semantic distinction between διάδημα and στέφανος see Beale; Koester; semantic remarks developed in the commentary literature.

architect and sovereign of the rebellion. However, in chapter 13, when the Beast arises from the sea (also with seven heads and ten horns), a noteworthy shift occurs: "on its horns were ten diadems" (ἐπὶ τῶν κεράτων αὐτοῦ δέκα διαδήματα), while on its heads are now blasphemous names.

This displacement is narratively and theologically significant. Diadems on the dragon's heads mark its claim to overarching, spiritual sovereignty. But when the Beast (the empire) takes power on earth, the diadems land on its horns — that is, on the executive institutions of power, on concrete kings and governors. In other words, demonic sovereignty is deposited and embodied in the state's executive apparatus. Conversely, ideology (blasphemous names) occupies the heads, becoming the new identity of the imperial center.[8]

This shift excellently highlights the mechanism of evil in history: spiritual inspiration (the dragon) does not act in a vacuum but is realized through very concrete political structures (horns) that receive regal legitimacy and insignia. For ecclesiology this means that spiritual warfare (Eph 6:12) has a very real political and social dimension. The Church does not fight abstract ideas but must confront institutionalized forms of idolatry in which human executive power (horns) dresses itself in diadems that belong only to God.

1.9.3 12. ὀνόματα βλασφημίας: the sacralization of state power

The presence of "blasphemous names" (ὀνόματα βλασφημίας) on the heads of the Beast (Rev 13:1) is key to understanding the nature of the conflict between the early Church and Rome. In Roman culture, especially in eastern provinces such as Asia Minor, imperial titles carried an explicitly quasi-religious value, and over time became outright divine. Titles such as Divus (Divine), Sebastos (Augustus, Venerable), Kyrios (Lord), or Soter (Savior) were commonly used in state propaganda, on coins, inscriptions and in the liturgy of the imperial cult as elements of legitimation of power.

Revelation subjects this process to uncompromising theological criticism. John's problem is not the mere existence of state administration (which St. Paul recognizes in Rom 13 as an instrument of order), but the radical replacement of God by the state and the attribution to the state of prerogatives strictly divine: final judgment, salvation, peace (the Pax Romana as a parody of Christ's peace) and absolute loyalty. Then power ceases to be merely political competence for managing the common good and becomes the object of religious worship. ὀνόματα βλασφημίας therefore do not merely indicate vulgar or insulting epithets hurled at heaven; they are a precise theological pointer to systemic deification of the state order.[9]

Contemporary theological reception of this motif reminds us that the state always tends to sacralize itself. When political authority demands from citizens a devotion that belongs only to the Creator, when state ideology becomes a new religion with its own dogmas and inquisition, then "blasphemous names" appear on the heads of the state. The task of the Catholic Church is the continuous stripping away of this false sacrality from power and the reminder that every earthly ruler is subject to the judgment of the Highest.

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[8] Analysis of the narrative displacement of diadems and its theological significance is corroborated in the literature (Aune; Koester).

[9] See Steven J. Friesen, Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John on the sacralization of imperial titles and their impact on early Christianity.

1.10 VI. Daniel 7 and apocalyptic typology

1.10.1 13. The “little horn”, time and the limitation of power

Daniel 7 introduces the very important motif of the “little horn” (Dan 7:8), which arises among the ten horns of the fourth beast. This little horn has eyes like a man and a mouth speaking great things; it speaks against the Most High, persecutes the saints and seeks “to change times and the Law” (Dan 7:25). In its original historical context this image is tied to the traumatic experience of persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. However, in later Jewish and Christian reception it becomes a universal pattern (type) of tyranny that in its pride temporarily exalts itself above God and His people.

John of Patmos creatively adopts this Danielic scheme when speaking of the time of the Beast’s rule. The Beast is granted authority to act for “forty-two months” (Rev 13:5), which corresponds exactly to Daniel’s “time, times and half a time” (Dan 7:25), and elsewhere in Revelation is expressed as 1,260 days (Rev 11:3; 12:6). From the perspective of rigorous exegesis this number does not provide any hidden calendar for calculating the date of the end of the world (a mistake condemned by the Church). Three and a half years is a broken, interrupted half of the number seven. It points to the radical limitation and incompleteness of the rule of evil. The time of the Beast is time-limited, strictly bound by divine providence.[10]

John’s re-reading therefore treats Daniel not as a memory of a closed past but as a living typological frame for recognizing tyranny. He does so without erasing the original sense of the Old Testament text. For the Christian this means that every persecution, however overwhelming and interminable it may seem, has a God-ordained end. The Beast’s rule is by definition temporary.

1.10.2 14. The Son of Man and counter-power

Daniel’s vision does not end with the triumph of the beasts. Its climax is the heavenly courtroom scene where “one like a Son of Man” comes on the clouds and is given by the Ancient of Days dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him (Dan 7:13–14). This is the Old Testament pattern of true, saving and eternal sovereignty that replaces bestial empires. John in Revelation transforms and christologizes this contrast in an absolutely brilliant way. The position of the Son of Man in Daniel is taken by John’s Lamb who “was slain” (ὁ ἀμνὸς ὁ ἐσφαγμένος; Rev 5:6), and yet who finally reigns and opens the seals of history.

The Lamb stands against the Beast whose power is based on brutal force, falsehood and violence. Danielic typology enables John to show the fundamental duality of human history. On one side there are kingdoms of vengeance, domination and predation (symbolized by the beasts); on the other — a kingdom of service, truth and sacrifice (embodied by the Son of Man/the Lamb). Thus the Book of Daniel becomes for John a theological matrix rather than merely a historical reference.[11]

The ecclesiological and ethical implications of this juxtaposition are clear. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is called to participate in the reign of the Son of Man, which means rejecting the methods of the Beast. Christian counter-power does not consist in replacing the Roman sword with a Christian sword but in imitating the logic of the Lamb. Victory comes through fidelity to truth and readiness for sacrifice, not through the exercise of imperial coercion.

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[10] Dan 7 and interpretations of the “little horn” and the reception of time-limitation of evil are discussed by John J. Collins and David E. Aune.

[11] Cf. the theological confrontation of Dan 7 with the Lamb imagery in Revelation — Bauckham and Beale.

1.11 VII. Mythological background and the reception of ancient monsters

1.11.1 15. Leviathan, Lotan, Tiamat: reservoirs of cultural memory

The images of multi-headed, marine monsters used by Revelation did not arise in a vacuum but point to an extensive symbolic repertoire of the ancient Near East. In the texts from Ugarit appears Lotan (Lotanu) — a powerful multi-headed sea serpent defeated by Baal. In Babylonian myth (Enuma Elish) Tiamat personifies the primeval chaotic sea, from whose body Marduk creates the world. Israelite biblical texts (e.g., Ps 74:13–14; Isa 27:1; Job 41) clearly remember these motifs, evoking Leviathan or Rahab. Yet the biblical tradition radically reinterprets them within strict monotheism.

In Scripture these terrifying creatures of chaos are reduced to created beings. They are not independent, eternal gods of evil but forces that Yahweh easily defeats, crushing their heads and exercising complete control over them (in Psalm 104 Leviathan even appears as God's "plaything," created for sport in the sea). John of Patmos, describing the dragon and the beasts, draws on this shared cultural memory while consistently demythologizing it in the Old Testament key. The dragon and the beasts of Revelation are not coequal opponents of God. They are subordinate, rebellious beings whose power has only been permitted for a set time.[12]

Using this mythological background allows John to create a dramatically forceful language that expresses the terror of persecution while remaining a theological commentary on God's absolute sovereignty. Methodologically, the Catholic scholar must avoid the pitfall of reductionist religious studies which would claim that Revelation is merely a "copy" of Babylonian myths. John uses mythic form (symbolic language) to convey an anti-mythic content: history is not ruled by blind chaos or a struggle between coequal gods, but by one sovereign God and His Christ.

1.11.2 16. Greco-Roman parallel images: Typhon and the Hydra

Besides the Semitic Near Eastern background, the motifs of monsters in Revelation also resonated with the imagination of readers from the Greco-Roman world. In Greek myth Typhon was a terrifying multi-headed monster who challenged Zeus, and the Lernaean Hydra (defeated by Heracles) was famous for its regenerating heads. These cultural parallels functioned as a broad background that made John's apocalyptic images immediately comprehensible and emotionally striking for pagans in Asia Minor who had come to faith.

However, direct, literary borrowings by John from Greek mythology are difficult to prove and often overstated by older liberal criticism. John rather updates and processes a common Mediterranean memory of the "monster of chaos," translating it into a rigorous biblical vocabulary based on Daniel and the prophets. The evocation of pagan monster-associations functions as a communicative bridge but in no way replaces biblical hermeneutics.[13]

Theologically, this balanced use of motifs shows that Christian revelation is able to "baptize" and employ universal cultural fears and archetypes (fear of the monster, chaos, death) to display Christ's ultimate victory. Roman power, which in its propaganda often identified the emperor with Heracles or Zeus overcoming forces of chaos, is unmasked: in reality Rome is that multi-headed Hydra and Typhon, and the only true victor is the slain Lamb.

[12] See the demythologization of ancient motifs in: John Day, God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea; Mark S. Smith.

[13] On the anthropological and cultural background of Greco-Roman myths see Theis; Smith.

1.12 VIII. Imperial cult, the economy of the mark and the religio-political framework of Rev 13

1.12.1 17. The Beast from the earth as a cult apparatus

The appearance of the Beast from the earth (Rev 13:11–18) is in John's text the critical element that makes the transformation of an ordinary state into a totalitarian religio-political system possible. This second Beast "had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon." This concise symbolism is masterful: it combines a deceptively gentle resemblance to Christ (the lamb) with the demonic, lying rhetoric of the dragon. The function of this figure in the narrative is clear and servile: it constructs an image (εἰκών) of the first Beast, commands worship of it, animates this image and brings it about that people receive the "mark" (χάραγμα).

In the historical context of the provincial imperial cult in Asia Minor (where the churches addressed in Rev 2–3 were located, e.g., Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum), this motif reads as a precise critique of local institutions. The Beast from the earth represents provincial associations (the so-called Koinon of Asia), local priests of the imperial cult (archiereis) and municipal officials who zealously promoted the cult of Rome and Augustus. They did this not necessarily out of deep religious conviction but treating the cult as a tool of political loyalty, social advancement and imperial integration.[14]

For contemporary theological reflection the Beast from the earth is the archetype of all propaganda and false religion that serves secular power. When religion loses its prophetic distance and becomes a chaplain to an oppressive state, justifying its crimes and sacralizing its leaders, it takes the form of the Beast from the earth. It speaks in a mild tone (like a lamb, appealing to peace, security, tradition), but its ultimate message is draconic: it demands absolute obedience to the system.

1.12.2 18. The "mark of the Beast": an economy of exclusion and loyalty

The description of the Beast's "mark" (χάραγμα, charagma), forcibly placed on the right hand or on the forehead (Rev 13:16–17), plays an extremely brutal, practical role of recruitment and social exclusion within the imperial system. The text clearly states that no one can "buy or sell unless he has the mark — the name of the Beast or the number of its name." Economic control turns quotidian aspects of life — market trade, guild craftwork, access to basic goods — into the ultimate test of religio-political loyalty.

In first-century realities, participation in the city's economic life was intimately tied to pagan cultic practice (e.g., the necessity to offer sacrifices before commencing guild activities, the use of coins bearing the image of the deified emperor). The economic component of the mark shows that resistance to the Beast is not merely a lofty idea but has real, often tragic consequences for daily life; compliance with the system becomes a condition of survival. John warns carefully but decisively: the desacralization of economics and its total subordination to the logic of idolatrous cult leads to the fracturing of social bonds and the marginalization of believers.[15]

Methodologically, the Catholic Church firmly rejects contemporary fundamentalist and conspiratorial theories identifying the "mark of the Beast" with barcodes, microchips, vaccines or credit cards. Charagma

[14] See Friesen; Macumber — particularly interpretations of the Beast from the earth as a local apparatus of the imperial cult (Koinon of Asia).

[15] Analyses of the economic dimension of the Beast's mark (charagma) appear in contemporary literature, including Friesen and Koester, as well as in the Bible Odyssey article.

in antiquity meant the imperial seal on a document or the brand on a slave. In Revelation it is the symbol of spiritual and existential belonging to the system of evil. Receiving the mark on the forehead (way of thinking) and on the hand (action) means full acceptance of the idolatrous order of the world. The apocalyptic refusal is thus an ethical choice that carries social and economic cost, not a flight from technology.

1.12.3 19. The religious-political-economic unity as a mechanism of coercion

Rev 13 masterfully displays the unification of religion, politics and economy into one crushing totalitarian machine. The Beast from the sea supplies brute force and political power, the Beast from the earth legitimizes it ideologically and cultically, and the horns and diadems actualize a multi-level executive structure. Economic blockade (the mark) completes the system, leaving the citizen with no sphere of freedom. Such unity constitutes the very essence of the imperial "order" and is what John unmasks as the gravest parody of God's order.

Conversion of loyalty (from God to the emperor), economic sanctions for disobedience and spectacular signs (the False Prophet's miracles) — all of this aims at total subjugation of humanity. Reading and correct exegesis of this chapter require taking into account the realities of the imperial cult's operation and local economic practices in Roman Asia, which together formed a web of constant pressure on early Christian communities. There was no division between the sacred and the profane; refusal to throw a pinch of incense on the emperor's altar was simultaneously treason and an economic crime.[16]

The conclusions for Catholic moral theology and social teaching are highly topical. This text warns against systems that seek to monopolize all human life — from spirituality to economy. When the state or any corporate power tries to integrate religion, politics and economy into one obligatory loyalty system, the Christian is called to prophetic resistance and preservation of freedom of conscience, even at the cost of economic exclusion.

1.13 IX. The theology of demonic power and the parody of kingship

1.13.1 20. Evil as imitation of good

The central thesis of John's theological discourse, which anticipates by centuries St. Augustine's classical theology of evil as privation of the good (privatio boni), is that evil in history acts only imitatively. Evil is not creative; it cannot generate new values, forms or true life. Instead it corrupts, distorts and appropriates elements of the order established by God. The Beast in Revelation literally "mimics" the traits of true kingship of Christ: it takes a throne, uses royal insignia (diadems), accepts titles (blasphemous names) and manifests a "pseudo-salvific" efficacy in quelling conflicts (Pax Romana as a parody of Christ's peace).

This imitation, however, has a deeply caricatural and ultimately destructive character. Where the Lamb represents service, self-giving and love unto the cross, the Beast represents violence, coercion and the devouring of others for its own survival. Recognizing this parody is the absolute key to theological discernment (diakrisis). It is not enough merely to condemn overt violence; the Christian must recognize that demonic order most often poses as salvific order, promising peace, security and prosperity in exchange

[16]The religious-political-economic consolidation of the Beast and its totalitarian character have been discussed in works by Aune, Friesen and Macumber.

for the soul.[17]

For the Church this means a need for constant vigilance. Power that promises a paradise on earth and a solution to all human problems by political means enters a messianic role and thereby becomes a parody of Christ (the Antichrist). True kingship, according to Revelation, always bears the signs of suffering and sacrifice, whereas the Beast's kingship rests on wounding others.

1.13.2 21. "It was given" (edothē): God's sovereignty and the reality of the Beast

In John's Greek narrative the specific passive form of the verb repeatedly appears: "it was given" (ἐδόθη αὐτῷ, edothē autō). It occurs particularly where the greatest triumphs of evil are described: the Beast "was given" mouths speaking great things, "was given" authority to act for forty-two months, "was given" to make war on the saints and to conquer them, and "was given" authority over every tribe and nation (Rev 13:5–7). This seemingly modest linguistic element (the so-called passivum divinum — theological passive) has a fundamental, consoling theological meaning.

It indicates unambiguously that the Beast's power is not absolute, self-generated or autonomous. It remains permitted from above, and hence is strictly encompassed within the limits of God's allowance and plan of salvation. God allows evil to act so that the faithfulness of the saints may be revealed and so that evil may ultimately destroy itself. This in no way trivializes or diminishes the real and bloody suffering of persons subject to imperial violence. It does, however, situate this historical conflict in an eschatological perspective: the history of violence is terrifyingly real, but it never escapes the ultimate sovereignty of God.[18]

For Catholic theology this conclusion is crucial. Revelation masterfully maintains the tension between the brutal reality of oppression (the Beast really kills the saints) and the unwavering certainty of God's judgment. The Christian suffering persecution knows that the Beast can act only to the extent that it has "been given." This awareness generates biblical endurance (hypomonē) and the faith of the saints (Rev 13:10).

1.13.3 22. Paschal parody: pseudo-resurrection vs. the Resurrection of the Lamb

One of the most striking images in chapter 13 is the motif of one of the heads of the Beast that seemed to have been "mortally wounded, and its mortal wound was healed" (Rev 13:3). The whole earth follows the revived Beast in wonder. Historically, this image can and should be read in the light of contemporary cultural narratives of returns, and in particular in the context of the myth of Nero redivivus, who allegedly did not die but fled to the Parthians and was to return at the head of an army to avenge himself on Rome. However, the deepest, key sense of this image is strictly theological and christological: it is a demonic parody of paschal victory. The true Lamb "was slain" (ἐσφαγμένον) and is truly alive, and his resurrection is the foundation of saving, life-giving kingship. By contrast, the Beast's "pseudo-rebirth" (which likewise had received a mortal wound, and lived — Rev 13:14) brings no salvific life. It is a masquerade, an illusion that deceives humanity and perpetuates a system of violence. Evil can simulate resurrection; it can rise

[17] The category of imitation of good and the parody of sovereignty is developed in detail in the works of Bauckham and Collins.

[18] On the language of "giving" (ἐδόθη - passivum divinum) and its deep theological significance see Aune; Koester.

again from historical downfalls (the revivals of totalitarianisms), inspiring wonder and fear in the crowds.[19] This juxtaposition — the true Pascha of Christ versus the false pascha of empire — is at the heart of John's theological program. God's victory is not based on invincible, brutal power, though that may appear dominant. True victory is founded on the logic of sacrifice, love and service that defeats death from within. The Beast's resuscitation is only an extension of the world's agony; the Lamb's resurrection is the beginning of a new creation.

1.14 X. The Lamb as counter-sovereign (counter-sovereignty)

1.14.1 23. The Lamb "standing as though slain": sacrifice as true authority

In the whole theological structure of Revelation the Lamb (Ἀρνίον, Arnion) is not merely a sentimental symbol of an innocent victim; He is the absolute center of the theology of kingship and power. In the decisive scene of chapter 5 John hears the promise of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, a mighty ruler. Yet when he turns, he sees a Lamb "standing as though slain" (ἀρνίον ἑστηκὸς ὡς ἐσφαγμένον; Rev 5:6). The marks of the sacrifice (wounds) do not vanish in the glory of resurrection but become the very form and proof of His victory. It is precisely this slain Lamb, not an armed Lion, who is worthy to take the scroll of history and open its seals.

Facing the mighty, tooth-armed Beast from the sea, the Lamb shows that true divine sovereignty does not rest on coercion, terror or manipulation. It consists in the transforming power of love, truth and radical, faithful obedience to the Father's will unto death. Therefore the Lamb's ultimate victory over the powers of evil is not simply the application of greater physical force (which would make Him only a greater beast). His sacrifice disarms the very claim of violence to ultimacy, exposing the dragon's lie.[20]

For Christian communities, both in the first century and today, this means a summons to a radical ethic of witness (martyrdom). Imitating the Lamb may involve social cost and even death, but never allows the conversion of faith into a program for political domination over others. The Church triumphs not when it acquires power in the image of the Beast but when it remains faithful to the logic of the Cross.

1.14.2 24. The diadems of Christ and the final judgment

The culminating point of the theology of Christ's power in Revelation is the vision of chapter 19. Christ returns as the Word of God on a white horse to carry out the final judgment. Verse 19:12 depicts his appearance: "His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems" (διαδήματα πολλά). A very sharp contrast appears here with the countable, limited diadems of the dragon (seven) and the Beast (ten). Where the diadems of evil are tied to specific heads and horns, symbolizing usurped, earthly political power, the plurality (uncountability) of Christ's diadems indicates absolute, universal and infinite authority.

Moreover, Christ's diadems are not the fruit of human legitimation, political coercion, military conquest or the lying propaganda of the False Prophet. His judgment and reign are final; they signify the fullness of rightful kingship whose only source is the eternal unity of the Son with the Father and His paschal victory

[19] The paschal parody, the Nero redivivus myth and the contrast with the true resurrection of the Lamb are discussed by Bauckham and Beale.

[20] The theology of the slain Lamb and its radical political and ecclesiological implications are treated in Bauckham, Beale and Koester.

on the Cross. The Beast accumulated diadems through theft and murder; Christ has them by the right of divine nature and by the right of the Redeemer.[21]

This is John's ultimate message to the Church: true authority in history is not the product of a system of violence, however invincible that system may seem. True authority is God's gift, which yields radically different fruits: justice, peace and the destruction of death itself. Before these "many diadems" of Christ, all claims of earthly empires prove to be finally pathetic and short-lived illusions.

1.15 XI. Theological reception: practical implications and hermeneutical limits

1.15.1 25. Rejection of simplifications: historicity and transhistory

A proper Catholic apocalyptic interpretation requires a rigorous distinction and simultaneous maintenance of the tension between the text's historical reference and the transhistorical function of its symbols. The texts of the Book of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John were addressed to very concrete believing communities in specific crisis situations and material contexts (persecution under Antiochus, pressure of the imperial cult in Asia Minor). Yet, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the images they employ acquired a universal, typological rank, becoming a lasting model for understanding the dynamics of evil in subsequent ages.

This distinction has fundamental methodological and pastoral consequences. On the one hand, the scholar or believer cannot mechanically replace the image of the Beast with a concrete, contemporary politician, banking system or international organization, treating Revelation like a newspaper with tomorrow's date. Such fundamentalist approaches destroy the historical sense of the text. On the other hand, one must not reduce Revelation to merely an "atemporal," detached allegory of the struggle between good and evil in the human soul. Proper hermeneutics combines historical accuracy with sensitivity to the typological power of the image.[22]

The Beast of the sea is Rome of the first century, but it is also every subsequent totalitarian system (Nazism, Communism, extreme forms of technocracy) that reproduces the same pattern of idolatry, oppression and falsehood. The Church reads Revelation not to guess the date of the end of the world but to unmask the returning masks of the Beast in every generation.

1.15.2 26. The ethics of witness toward politics and avoiding demonization

From the entirety of Revelation of St. John emerges a demanding ethic of refusing the cult of power and a summons to steadfast witness (often unto martyrdom). However, its practical application in the life of the Church cannot be reduced to a nihilistic, anarchistic demonization of every form of secular authority. Revelation does not nullify St. Paul's teaching in Rom 13; it does not teach that all political power is evil by nature. It rather asserts forcefully that power is deeply susceptible to distortion and becomes demonic when it claims divine prerogatives and instrumentalizes human life for its own glory.

The Church's task is therefore continuous spiritual discernment and resistance to those forms of politics, ideology and economy that demand from the citizen absolute, blind loyalty and use religion as an

[21] Cf. the exegesis of Rev 19:12 and the contrast of Christ's diadems in Beale's interpretation.

[22] On the distinction between historical and transhistorical readings and the rejection of fundamentalism see the methodological notes and works of John J. Collins and Macumber.

instrument of violence. This is a resistance that has the character of bearing witness to truth and faithfulness to the Lamb, not the program of armed political revolution or the building of a theocracy.[23]
The Christian lives in the world and respects just laws of the state, but his ultimate loyalty (his diadem and his mark) belongs solely to Christ. When the state exceeds its competence and becomes a Beast, the Church has the obligation to remind it of its limits, even if the price of that reminder is exclusion from the markets and agoras of this world.

1.16 Conclusion

An exhaustive analysis of the iconography of evil in the Apocalypse of St. John — encompassing the motifs of seven heads, ten horns, diadems, blasphemous names, the sea as the seat of chaos, and the triple structure of the dragon, the Beast from the sea and the Beast from the earth — reveals an extremely coherent theological anatomy of imperial violence. John of Patmos, under the inspiration of the Spirit, masterfully uses the prophetic heritage of the Book of Daniel, ancient Near Eastern myths and the brutal realities of the imperial cult to create a timeless diagnosis of the mechanisms of oppression. At the same time he points to the only, ultimate salvific alternative embodied by the slain and risen Lamb.
The key interpretive categories emerging from this study are: the concept of evil as parasitic imitation of the good; the typological use of Daniel's texts (combining historical reference with a transhistorical paradigm); the deep analysis of the religious-political-economic unity of the Beast's system; and the concept of the Lamb's counter-sovereignty, based on sacrifice and not coercion. Catholic interpretation of these texts remains open to precise historical particulars while firmly rejecting sensational identifications, sectarian date-counting and reductionist conclusions. Its ultimate aim is the formation of the believing community — enabling it to recognize and reject contemporary cults of power and to remain in joyful, hope-filled witness of faithful loyalty to Christ, the only true King, crowned with many diadems.

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Bible: Revelation (Rev), Book of Daniel (Dan), Psalms (Ps), Isaiah (Isa), Letter to the Romans (Rom), Letter to the Ephesians (Eph) — references to quotations and images are consistent with the texts of Sacred Scripture.

1.18 Notes

2 Glossary of Key Terms

arnion – **arnion**: “Lamb”: Christ victorious through sacrifice and fidelity
onomata blasphēmias – **onomata blasphēmias**: “blasphemous names”: sacralisation of created authority
charagma – **charagma**: “mark”: coerced religio-political loyalty
diadēma – **diadēma**: diadem: insignia of a royal claim
drakōn – **drakōn**: “dragon”: God’s adversary and instigator of rebellion
edothē – **edothē**: “it was given”: limited and non-autonomous character of the Beast’s authority
keras – **keras**: “horn”: sign of strength and royal power
stephanos – **stephanos**: wreath: granted reward of victory and fidelity
thalassa – **thalassa**: “sea”: image of chaos, threat, and the opposite of created order
thērion – **thērion**: “beast”: symbol of idolatrous and oppressive authority