

The Metaphor of Beasts and Heads

Prophetic beasts come dramatically onto the scene in Daniel 7. They are called “**great** beasts” without explanation except for their surrealistic aggressive nature (7:3). Later, they are said to represent kingdoms (7:17). There, beasts symbolize four different empire realities that come in sequence.

Though these beasts relate directly to Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome; their leaders, kings (especially at the *time* the prophetic message applies), often personify the kingdoms. As an example, Nebuchadnezzar was symbolized by a lion and an eagle (Lion – Jeremiah 4:7; 49:19, 22; 50:17, 44. Eagle – Jeremiah 49:22, Lamentations 4:19, Ezekiel 17:3, Habakkuk 1:8). Therefore, we see a:

- Primary application: Beast – Kingdom
- Secondary application: King – kingdom – personification of that kingdom

There are two unique kingdom leaders that epitomize this second consideration.

A mystical beast is the dragon (*drakon* – Gr.). This is presented frequently by John in his Revelation (12:4, 7, 9, 13, 16-17; 13:2, 4, 11; 16:13; 20:2) where he identifies it as a specific being – that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan (12:9). Thus, a single kingdom beast equals a single being. Here, the designation, as in Daniel, is prophecy specific. The context tells us how it is to be understood. The dragon is the leader of the kingdom of Satan.

Another “beast” representing a single person is the Lamb. Jesus was “like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7); the “Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8 – NIV). The imagery of Christ is beautifully embellished by one of the 24 elders: “Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda[h], the Root of David, hath prevailed ... And I beheld ... a Lamb as it had been slain” (Revelation 5:5-6). Again, the context reveals the meaning we are to derive from the prophecy. This “Lamb” refers to the “Lamb of God” (John 1:36), head of the kingdom of God.

Another disposition of a beast’s prophetic relevance is when the *animal* personifies specific groups of people in kingdoms. In Matthew 25:32 a judgment scene is associated with the second coming of Jesus. “When the Son of man shall come ... before Him shall be gathered all nations.” “Nations” (KJV) is *ethnos* (Gr.) and refers to “all peoples.”¹ Then King Jesus (He’s on a throne of glory) separates the *sheep* from the *goats*. The sheep are those who will inherit the kingdom of the Father (Matthew 25:34) and the goats are destined to the “everlasting fire” (Matthew 25:41), which is the end of the kingdom of evil (“the devil and his angels” – 25:41).

Thus, beasts can represent:

1. Kingdoms – primary application
2. Kingdom heads – secondary application
3. Kingdom people/members – tertiary application

The latter is seen in Daniel 8 where there is conflict between a ram (God’s kingdom – headed by Christ) and the he-goat (Satan’s kingdom – headed by the devil). The powers exhibited by these kingdoms are horns representing the groups of people that provide leadership and power to each beast/kingdom.

As prophetic beasts are studied, which of the three applications above that should be used will be found in its context. In Revelation 13, the sea-beast provides a beautiful example. Throughout the Old Testament a sea monster is used to represent an evil kingdom (Job 40, 41; Psalm 74:13-14; Isaiah 27:1, 51:9). This beast (*therion* – fierce creature) imagery appeals to this creature slowly arising from the sea. It is a creative composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7:1-7. There, they also come out of the sea, with specific reference to heads and ten horns. The blasphemous mouth (Daniel 7:8) is tied to the blasphemous names on the heads of the Revelation 13 beast. In Daniel 7 the lion, bear, leopard and “terrifying beast” represent those four successive world empires (kingdoms); here, three are depicted in one beast.

- Leopard (beast in general) – swiftness in its work
 - Bear (feet) – power in its activity, capable of persecution
 - Lion (mouth) – strength of its jaws and power in its evil words truth and righteousness
- } An end-time world-controlling empire will avenge

Daniel’s fourth beast was a horrific creature that represented Rome.

Daniel 7

Beast – terrible in nature
 One head
 Ten horns
 Little horn from head
 (blasphemous mouth)

Revelation 13

Beast – composite of leopard, bear, lion
 Seven heads
 Ten horns
 Acted like little horn
 (heads named blasphemy)

What regime or dynasty functions for a short time (42 months – 13:5) when Satan knows his time is short (12:12)? – a kingdom that he (the dragon) gave total authority to (over kindreds, tongues and nations – 13:7). The ties to the blasphemous little horn, terrible fourth beast and a similar timing reference (time, times and dividing of time – 7:25) suggest that the sea-beast is also a Roman kingdom at the end of time.² Intriguingly, the combined qualities of Israel’s pagan oppressors (Hosea 13:7-8) were depicted as a lion, leopard and bear.

What could this end-time beast/kingdom be? Let’s look at the “heads” of the same beast before its horns were crowned.

The Heads of the Beast

At times it is helpful to work backwards in prophetic symbol study. The ten-horned beast of Revelation 17, that is tied to the woman named Babylon the Great, has seven heads. The angel said that this woman sat on seven hills. At the time of John, Rome was noted as the seven-hilled city. Vespasian, one of Nero’s generals, later became emperor of Rome (69–79 A.D. – He struck coins showing a woman seated on seven hills to represent that kingdom.³

It appears that the “mountain” reference is to alert the expositor that the woman is seated in Rome. Then the message was given that the “woman ... is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 17:18). The literal city becomes a metaphor for the woman called Babylon, the apostate, the harlot! Babylon is called “that great city” (Revelation 14:8) and, historically, so is Rome.

The angel told John that the seven heads on this beast were seven kings (17:9-10). This statement clearly shows that *during the life of this beast* kingdom there were or would be seven specific temporal leaders. They were sequential (five are fallen, one is and one is yet to come). The first would begin when the woman and the beast were associated.

With this “model” to draw on, we look to the seven heads of the sea-beast (Revelation 13:1-3). There, the imagery reveals the seven heads *to be present* when the beast appears. The leaders of the beast kingdom (*therion*) have all come into the stage of history. It must be assumed that it is during the seventh’s reign that this chapter is choreographed.

Kingdom Rome related (antichrist, blasphemous)	Heads (kings) Pope (king) (deity claims)	} Dragon gives it power and authority (over world)
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As Christ is head of the body (the church – Colossians 1:18), so the head of the beast would be its leader or temporal head. The picture of a kingdom head is reinforced with the notion that one of the heads was “as it were, wounded to death” (Revelation 13:2). Later in the chapter it states that that “beast, which had the wound ... did live” (13:14). A distinction between the heads (seven in number) and a single beast with a wounded head strongly supports a kingdom with a defined sequence or group of leaders.

The one head that was wounded “to death” has been applied to three papal events (the papacy was the Rome associated empire that Protestants protested against because of blasphemy):

1. Pope Pius VI’s arrest on February 20, 1798 and, later, death in Valence, France. A new pope was shortly thereafter appointed (wound was healed).
2. September 20, 1870, Italian troops entered Rome. The next month the citizens of Rome in a plebiscite voted for union with Italy. Pope Pius IX was helpless. The Papal States and the city of Rome were no longer Vatican land/“states.” The church/state was reestablished in 1929 (wound was healed).
3. May 13, 1991, Mehmet Ali Agca, shot Pope John Paul II. He survived to visit his would be assassin. His power grew (wound was healed).

Any one of these papal “wounds” could persuasively be applied to the “wounded head” that was “healed.” A single “person” head or leader is appealed to.

Kingdom – nation
(beast) – ecclesiastical body
– political state

Leader – king/pope
(heads of beast)

Beast – kingdom
– nation
– ecclesiastical body

Head – leader } of beast power
– king }
– pope }

Summary

“Beasts” in apocalyptic prophecy are metaphors for kingdom powers. They often control wide territories with a central enclave for its dominion power. Beasts/animals have loyal subjects and represent the extremes of moral authority. They are usually governed by charismatic or powerful leaders depicting sovereign control. Within this rich imagery God manipulates the symbols to teach valuable insights from His viewpoint of each power. Thus, Jesus is a Lamb and a Lion. The antichrist is a composite beast of evil and a little horn of power that becomes great.

Since prophecy has its origins in God’s mind, He has original permission to make the images of beasts, horns, heads, eyes, water or mouths adaptive and germane. Within the context of each vision and audition, God informs us as to the interpretative use of each illustration. At times, multiple lessons are imbedded in a prophecy, but there is always a primary application.

Prophetic metaphors elevate the baseline of our understanding. They draw on deeper issues that God would appeal to in the realm of spiritual discernment. The beasts and heads of real or surreal creatures reveal snippets of future history in the final war between good and evil. Their outcome: fire for the dragon and seven-headed beast; Marriage Supper of the Lamb for the saved.

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References:

- ¹ Brown, Collin; *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI), 1986, p. 793.
- ² Thomas, Robert L.; *Revelation 1–7 – An Exegetical Commentary* (Moody Press, Chicago – 1992), p. 155.
- ³ Captain Smyth, *Roman Coins*, as quoted in: Jamieson, Fausset, Brown; *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 310.