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Craig R. Koester

Luther Seminary, ckoester@luthersem.edu

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THE IMAGE OF THE BEAST FROM THE LAND (REV 13,11-18):
A STUDY IN INCONGRUITY

Revelation's images play a major role in engaging the imagination and shaping the perspectives of its readers. The central conflict between God and evil is portrayed on a cosmic scale through images of a seven-horned Lamb, a seven-headed beast from the sea, and a host of other fantastic beings. On one hand, the significance seems clear. The writer assumes there are conflicting demands on the readers' loyalty. Therefore, the images offer well-defined alternatives that urge continued allegiance to God and resistance toward God's opponents. But on the other hand, the images are polyvalent and their significance is indirect. Readers cannot expect to see the monsters as they are portrayed in the text. Instead, they must discern how the pictures in the text pertain to a social context outside the text—and differences in interpretation have shown how challenging that can be.

Our focus here is the beast from the land, which has features of a lamb and a dragon. It calls down fire from heaven and promotes worship of the beast from the sea. The monster slaughters those who refuse to worship and forces people to receive a mark on their foreheads or right hands if they want to buy or sell (Rev 13,11-18). It seems clear that the image is negative, but in matters of detail much is disputed. Just who or what are the readers supposed to resist? How would one actually refuse the insidious mark? To what extent does the imagery give readers a well-defined sense of what to do, and to what extent do the images leave a great deal open to the readers' discernment¹?

Interpretation of the image is challenging because of incongruities at several levels. We will explore the incongruities in four steps: First, we will ask how the land beast's appearance and actions are portrayed in the text. Second, we will consider how the image might be

¹ J. FREY, *Die Bildersprache der Johannesapokalypse*, in *ZTK* 98 (2001) 161-185; cf. P.A. HARLAND, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress 2003, p. 262.

correlated with the social world of first-century readers. Third, we will ask how the image might inform the actions of the readers and what it would mean to resist the mysterious mark that is required for commerce. Fourth, we will compare current interpretations of the imagery with those of second and third century interpreters, which were rather different, and then consider the implications.

I. LITERARY INCONGRUITY

The image of the beast from the land comes to us in a text, and it is helpful to begin with attention to the process of reading. The words in the text evoke associations in the minds of the readers, so their initial impressions of the image are informed by what they know from other contexts. As people read, they find that some associations are appropriated, while others are screened out, and new elements are added. Here the readers I envision are those portrayed in Revelation's opening chapters. They are members of Christian communities in Asia Minor in the late first century, who would have heard the text read aloud (1,3-4). I assume that the individual perspectives of readers in those congregations would have varied, but collectively the imagery would have evoked associations from other parts of Revelation, from Jewish scripture and tradition, and from Greco-Roman traditions and practices that were part of their cultural context².

1. *Incongruity and the Description of the Beast*

Given the range of possible associations outlined above, let me propose that an initial impression of the image is *incongruity at the literary level*³. The image combines features of a beast, a lamb, and a dragon. These elements stand in tension with each other. Consider the major elements that are combined in the image.

² On the social setting of Revelation and aspects of intertextuality see C.R. KOESTER, *Revelation* (AYB, 38A), New Haven, CT—London, Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 85-96, 123-126.

³ On incongruity in images see FREY, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 177; M. KOCH, *Drachenkampf und Sonnenfrau: Zur Funktion des Mythischen in der Johannesapokalypse am Beispiel von Apk 12* (WUNT, II/184), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2004, pp. 7-13.

a) *Beast*

The word θηρίον suggests a threatening animal. Although the word could be used in a neutral way, Revelation uses it for wild animals that can kill (6,8). That sense is prominent here, since the beast from the land works alongside the beast from the sea, which has traits of a leopard, lion, bear, and ten-horned monster, and it kills people (13,1-10). The threatening sense also appears in other ancient sources⁴.

b) *Lamb*

In contrast, the word ἀρνίον suggests harmlessness. Earlier the writer pictured Christ as a slaughtered lamb, a victim whose blood was shed (5,6.20.23), and other sources depict lambs as vulnerable⁵. Here the text heightens the incongruity by identifying the beast's two horns as lamblike traits. Readers might have pictured a sacrificial lamb with horns (*t. Pesah* 6,7), and Christ the slaughtered lamb has seven horns (Rev 5,6). But horns can connote strength and destructive power⁶. The image combines connotations of harmlessness with an ability to inflict harm.

c) *Dragon*

Ancient sources pictured dragons as serpents that were overtly threatening. The portrayal of Satan as a dragon that pulls stars from the sky, tries to devour a child, and does battle with the angels emphasizes the threatening aspect (12,1-17)⁷. Yet the dragon in

⁴ For instances where θηρίον is neutral see Gen 1,24; Ps 104,11. For wild and dangerous animals see Lev 26,6; Wis 12,9; Mark 1,13; *Pss. Sol.* 13,3. The traits of the sea beast correspond to the images of threatening empires in Dan 7,2-8. On Behemoth, the description in Job 40,16-19 assumes that the creature lives in the water, but according to later tradition it lived on land (*I En.* 60,7-8). The traits of a θηρίον were used metaphorically for tyrants (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4.38).

⁵ On the vulnerability of an ἀρνίον see Jer 11,19; 50,45 (27,45 LXX); *Ps. Sol.* 8,23; 2 *Clem.* 5,2-4.

⁶ A horn could be construed as power in either a positive or negative sense. A horn could be used to either save (Ps 18,2; Luke 1,69) or destroy (Ps 22,21; Zech 1,19).

⁷ In Jewish sources, dragons were arrogant and combative creatures (*Ps. Sol.* 2,25; Add Esth 11,6; *Sib. Or.* 5,29). The serpentine dragon named Python threatened Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 140). The mythic monster Typhon could also be called a dragon (Plutarch, *Mor.* 359E). On the sinister

Revelation is also a deceiver, which suggests that the threatening quality of the beast's dragon-like speech might not be fully apparent (12,9). The imagery combines elements of an overt and covert threat.

Taken together, these elements present incongruities that must be adjudicated through the process of reading. A common way to discern coherence is by contrasting appearance and reality. The monster's appearance might seem as benign as that of a lamb, but that is deceptive. It is actually a dangerous beast, like the so-called wolf in sheep's clothing (Matt 7,15). Its dragon-like speech reveals its threatening character.

2. Incongruity and the Actions of the Beast

The incongruity persists as we consider the various actions ascribed to the beast. The monster is a political functionary with the power of capital punishment; it promotes of the ruler cult, is a miracle-working false prophet and a controller of commerce. Let me propose that we not assume that this combination of roles directly mirrors the readers' social world. Instead, we need to consider how these roles stand in tension with each other—like the tensions created by combining a beast, lamb, and dragon in a single image.

a) Political Functionary and Agent of Persecution

The beast from the land exercises “all” (πᾶσα) the authority of the sea beast on its behalf. That authority is political and it extends over every tribe and nation, and over the inhabitants of the earth (13,5-7.12). A major expression of the sea beast's authority is persecuting the saints (13,7). By extension that is also true for the land beast, which works under its auspices. Specifically, the beast from the land uses political power to impose the death sentence on the people who refuse to worship the statue of the sea beast (13,15).

This political aspect might evoke associations from various literary sources. Ancient readers might have recalled stories of persecution by the ruling power from the book of Daniel.

appearance and hissing sound of a dragon see Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 4.153-55. On these traditions see J. FONTENROSE, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origin*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1959, pp. 13-22, 70-76.

In that literary context it is King Nebuchadnezzar who demands that people worship the statue he set up or else be put to death (Dan 3,4-6), and King Darius who demands that people worship him alone for a stated period of time under threat of capital sentence (4,7). Later, the agent of persecution is depicted as a beast's horn, who makes war against the holy ones of God (7,19-22).

In the social context of first-century readers, Revelation's imagery could evoke accounts of Christians being condemned by Roman authorities, sometimes for refusing to honor the statue of the emperor. At the same time, it seems unlikely that the scale of persecution depicted in Revelation corresponds directly to the readers' social situation. Studies have shown that persecution of Christians in the first century was local rather than widespread. Revelation may portray the land beast conducting a state-sponsored campaign of slaughter against all those who refuse to worship the ruler's statue, but that extensive level of persecution would not directly mirror the readers' experience⁸.

b) *Promoter of the Ruler Cult*

The land beast makes the populace erect an image of the sovereign sea beast as a focus for worship (Rev 13,12.14). Here again ancient readers might have drawn some associations from literary contexts like the stories of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3,1-7) or Beliar setting up images for worship (*Mart. Asc. Isa.* 4,11). In the readers' imperial context, the situation was different. In Asia Minor the ruler cult was not instituted by the emperor or the provincial governor. Instead, city representatives initiated efforts to build provincial temples to Roman emperors in some cities, while wealthy patrons erected temples and statues to emperors in others. Some citizens held administrative positions and some served in imperial priesthoods⁹.

⁸ On a Roman proconsul condemning Christians for refusing to honor the emperor's statue see Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.5-6. For later accounts see the *Martyrdom of Apollonius 7; Martyrdom of Pionius 5; Martyrdom of Dasius 7*. On the scope of Roman persecution of Christians in the first century see A. YARBRO COLLINS, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia, PA, Westminster, 1984, pp. 69-73; L. L. THOMPSON, *The Book of Revelation, Apocalypse and Empire*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 95-115; P. ACHEMEIER, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia), Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1996, pp. 28-35.

⁹ See S.J. FRIESEN, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins*, New York, NY, 2001, pp. 25-132; ID, *The Beast from the Land: Revelation 13,11-18 and Social Setting*, in D. BARR (ed.) *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students* (SBLRBS, 44), Atlanta, GA, 2003, 49-64, pp. 52-59.

c) *Miracle-worker*

The land beast does miracles like calling down fire from heaven and animating a statue so it can speak (Rev 13,13-15). These details evoke an intriguing range of associations. On the one hand, it suggests that the beast from the land is a prophet. Calling down fire from heaven is reminiscent of the prophet Elijah, though other figures, who were not prophets, were also said to have this ability¹⁰. The prophetic aspect fits calling the beast from the land a “false prophet” elsewhere in Revelation (16,13; 19,20; 20,10).

For some interpreters, ancient readers would have assumed that the beast’s act of animating a statue is a hoax. For example, the story of Bel and the Dragon told of bogus claims about a statue that seemed to consume food (Bel 1-26). In the second century C.E. a huckster and false prophet named Alexander created an oracular shrine that featured the image of a snakelike deity with an artificial head and hinged jaws that could be moved by cords. Someone behind the scenes could speak through a tube to give the impression that the statue was speaking (Lucian, *Alex.* 26)¹¹.

Other interpreters propose that animating the statue means that the beast from the land functions as a sorcerer—and sorcery is something that Revelation condemns (Rev 9,20; 18,23; 21,8; 22,15). In the ancient world, tales were told of magicians who could give breath to inanimate objects and make them move. Sorcery was thought to work by demonic agency. In the Roman world sorcery was considered deviant and dangerous to society. It was officially condemned, but practiced at the popular level¹².

¹⁰ Calling fire from heaven was ascribed to Elijah (1 Kgs 18,24.37-38; 2 Kgs 1,10.12), as well as David, Solomon, and Abraham (1 Chron 21,26; 2 Chron 7,1; *T. Ab.* 10,11; cf. Luke 9,54). In the Greco-Roman world, the usual source of fire from heaven was Jupiter or Zeus, who was pictured with a thunderbolt. It was said that when fire flashed from a temple, people construed it as a manifestation of Zeus: G.W. BOWERSOCK, *The Mechanics of Subversion in the Roman Provinces*, in K.A. RAAFLAUB et al (eds.), *Opposition et résistance à l’empire d’Auguste à Trajan*, Geneva, Hardt Foundation, 1987, 291-317, pp. 295-296.

¹¹ B.K. BLOUNT, *Revelation: A Commentary* (NTL), Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2009, p. 258; W.J. HARRINGTON, *Revelation* (Sacra Pagina 16), Collegeville, MN, 1993, p. 143; M.G. REDDISH, *Revelation* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary), Macon, GA, Smyth & Helwys, 2001, p. 259; S. J. SCHERRER, *Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13,13-15*, in *JBL* 103 (1984) 599-610; E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1991, pp. 85-86.

¹² For examples of sorcerers animating objects see Ps.-Clement, *Recognitions* 3.47.2; Lucian, *Philops.* 14; 35; Apuleius, *Metam.* 3.16; cf. F. BOVON, *Possession or Enchantment? The Roman Institutions according to the Revelation of John*, in *New Testament and Apocryphal Narratives*, Allison Park, PA, Pickwick, 1995, pp. 133-

d) *Controller of the Market*

The land beast controls access to markets by requiring that those who wish to buy or sell receive the mark of the sea beast on their foreheads or right hands. I will consider the specific question of the mark in more detail below but here want to highlight the difficulty in making a direct link to the roles listed above. In terms of political functionaries, a Roman governor served as the agent of imperial authority in a province and could impose capital punishment. He oversaw the funding associated with imperial administration and could establish some regulations pertaining to commercial transactions¹³. On a local level there were civic officials would oversee aspects of the public market, though they did not have the power to impose capital punishment.

When Revelation combines the various roles outlined above, the result is a degree of incongruity, similar to the incongruous blending of a beast, lamb, and dragon. Readers might associate political administration and the exercise of capital punishment with a high-ranking Roman official like the governor, but such officials were not the primary promoters of temples or statues to the emperor and were not regarded as prophets. Similarly prophets or magicians were not associated with control of commerce or political administration. The distinctive fusion of roles would not necessarily have been familiar to early readers.

Instead, the image is designed to shape the readers' perceptions of their social context so that they see it critically. The writer highlights connections between political administration, worship, and commerce that might not have been readily apparent otherwise. The same will be true later in the book where the author portrays Babylon in a similar way, as the city that rules the world and deceives the nations by her sorcery, enticing them with prospects of economic gain while engaging in violence against the followers of Jesus. This leads to the next

145; P.B. DUFF, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 116; R.L. THOMAS, *Magical Motifs in the Book of Revelation* (LNTS, 416), London — New York, T. & T. Clark, 2010, pp. 68-81.

¹³ Note for example the decree of the governor of Lycia from 44.C.E. He declared that “every transaction of every kind will be invalid from today’s day on if it is written in palimpsest or has interpolations or erasures, whether it be a contract or a bond or an agreement or an order or a notice-and-accounting or an offer or a deposition for a trial or dowry details or a decision of arbiters or judges”, in N. LEWIS – M. REINHOLD (eds.), *Roman Civilization*, 3rd ed., New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 1990, vol. 2, p. 281.

question, which is how early readers might have connected such imagery to their social context.

II. INCONGRUITY BETWEEN THE TEXT AND THE READERS' SOCIAL CONTEXT

A second aspect of incongruity is that what is described *in* the text does not correspond directly to what readers can expect to see *outside* the text. If the connection were direct, then readers should expect to see this two-horned talking monster walking down the streets of Ephesus. But the challenge is this: They will *not* see the beast that the text describes in their social context. Instead, they must ask how the incongruous description of the beast makes them see their social context differently¹⁴.

1. *Parody and Interpretation of Incongruity*

Parody can provide a helpful way to consider the incongruous relationship between the text and the readers' social context. Parody can be a potent means of social critique, which uses exaggeration. Three factors are needed for parody to work¹⁵: (a) The writer must deal with a text or topic whose main features are known to the readers. (b) The writer must alter and exaggerate certain features of the basic pattern. The exaggeration may combine elements that are serious, comical, and fantastic. Yet with the exaggerations and fantastic elements, the basic subject must still be recognizable. (c) The effect must be comic or satirical. Parody allows something that ordinarily seems impressive to be brought down to size, so that it can be perceived as unworthy of respect.

Parody is often used to interpret Revelation at the literary level. For example, the beast that has a few lamblike traits and is the agent of the devil may be considered a grotesque parody of Christ, who is the true Lamb of God. But my interest here is the way parody might help us

¹⁴ FREY, *Die Bildersprache* (n. 1), pp. 182-185; KOCH, *Drachenkampf* (n. 3), p. 12.

¹⁵ R.F. GLEI, "Parody", in *Brill's New Pauly*, vol. 10, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 546-550, G. CAREY, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 1999, pp. 150-151.

relate the image to the readers' social context. We can ask where they might have discerned the primary points of correlation between the image and their social world, where they might have seen exaggerations, and how the exaggerations might nonetheless shape their perceptions of their social world.

2. *Current Proposals*

Current scholarship on Revelation generally assumes that the beast from the land is a collective figure and not an individual. That assumption follows the pattern of construing the beast from the sea and Babylon the whore as collective figures. In the final section of this paper, we will see that this assumption was not shared by interpreters of the second and third centuries. But among current interpreters, the main points of difference are whether the imagery has a general or more specific correlation with social realities in the readers' context. As we review some of the current options, we will ask where the proposals discern primary points of correlation between text and context, and which aspects of the image are creative embellishments that are added for critique¹⁶.

a) *General support for Greco-Roman religion, including the imperial cult*

Revelation is critical of all forms of idolatry (9,20; 21,8; 22,15). Since the imperial cult was linked to the worship of traditional deities, this proposal is that the beast personifies broad popular support for polytheistic worship of all sorts. For some interpreters, the warnings against idolatry can be addressed to people inside the church, like those who follow the teachings of Balaam and Jezebel and advocate openness to Greco-Roman religious practice (2,14.20). For other interpreters, the image is construed as a warning against the broader social pressures to accommodate the religious practices of the dominant culture¹⁷.

¹⁶ See the helpful summary in FRIESEN, *The Beast from the Land* (n. 9), pp. 59-63.

¹⁷ M.E. BORING, *Revelation* (Interpretation), Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 1989, p. 157; REDDISH, *Revelation* (n. 11), p. 258 J. ROLOFF, *Revelation* (Continental Commentaries), Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1993, p. 164; S.S. SMALLEY, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 2005, p. 359; THOMPSON, *The Book of Revelation* (n. 8), p. 164.

From this perspective, the primary point of correlation between the text and social context is the element of false worship. The statues used in the imperial cult and in the worship of traditional Greco-Roman deities were erected by many different kinds of people. An advantage of this approach is that it recognizes the evocative quality of the imagery in Revelation. A disadvantage is that it is too general. The general public was not associated with prophetic power or control of the market, and the public did not have the ability to impose a capital sentence. All those aspects of the image can be regarded as creative exaggerations, though it seems more likely the image could have more specific correlations with social realities known to the readers.

b) *Provincial council or “koinon” of Asia*

The members of the council were men who had considerable wealth, and they represented the cities of the province. The council was not the principal decision-making body in the region, since cities could bring issues directly before the governor or send delegations to Rome. But the council did oversee the provincial cults of the emperors: one was dedicated to Augustus and Roma at Pergamum, another to Tiberius, Livia, and the Senate at Smyrna, and a third to the Flavians at Ephesus. The council also appointed the high priests and priestesses, who served at the provincial level, and oversaw the province’s sacrifices and festivals¹⁸.

One problem with this proposal is that the council dealt only with the provincial temples and priesthoods, whereas many imperial cults functioned on the local level. Another issue is that the council did not have a significant role in overseeing commerce, which is a major element in the portrayal of the beast from the land.

c) *Imperial priesthood*

This proposal is somewhat different from the previous one, since it focuses on those who actually served as priests in the imperial cult. At the provincial level, those who held

¹⁸ On the function of the council see FRIESEN, *The Beast from the Land* (n. 9), p. 51. On associating the council with the land beast see G.K. BEALE, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 717; BLOUNT, *Revelation* (n. 11), p. 257; BOVON, *Possession* (n. 12), p. 137

priesthoods were expected to pay for the sacrifices that honored the emperors. They also underwrote expenses for the festivals, which included athletic and musical competitions and went on for some days. In return, they received considerable honor and recognition from the public for their service. Some members of the council served in such priesthoods, but not all of them did so. Moreover, many people served as priests and priestesses in imperial cults at the local rather than the provincial level¹⁹.

This proposal gives prominence to aspects of the land beast's image that pertain to support for the ruler cult. Many who served in this way were people of means, though they did not exercise direct control of the market, and this priestly office was not linked to prophetic power or miracle-working. Again, those would be considered creative exaggerations. The most significant problem with this approach is that it too narrowly focuses on priesthood, since people could support the ruler cult in other ways such as benefaction.

d) *Aristocratic supporters of the imperial cult*

Many of the imperial cult's supporters came from the social elite. They helped pay for temples and statues, and some held imperial priesthoods. Some served on urban councils and in civic administration, which could include some oversight of markets. Inscriptions show that many of the strongest supporters of the imperial cult in Asia Minor held important civic offices, such as head of the council, financial officer of the council, secretary of the citizenry, city treasurer, and superintendent of public works²⁰.

The value of this proposal is that weight is given a combination of political authority, economic influence, and patronage for the imperial cult. Of the options surveyed, this last one seems most viable. The proposal incorporates more of the features of the beast, while treating

¹⁹ D. E. AUNE, *Revelation*, 3 vols. (WBC, 52), Dallas, TX, Word, 1997-1998, vol. 2, p. 756; S. R. F. PRICE, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 197-198; H. GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Regensburger Neues Testament), Regensburg, Pustet, 1997, p. 312.

²⁰ A. YARBRO COLLINS, *What the Spirit Says to the Churches: Preaching the Apocalypse*, in *Quarterly Review* 4 (1984) 69-84, p. 82; F.J. MURPHY, *Fallen is Babylon: The Revelation to John*, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press International, 1998, p. 309. On the inscriptions that support this approach see FRIESEN, *Beast from the Land* (n. 9), pp. 55-57, 62.

the dimension of miracle-working power and the ability to impose capital punishment as exaggerations.

The aristocratic supporters of the cult enjoyed considerable social prestige, but the way the author parodies them is designed to alter the way readers see them. Their efforts to promote the ruler cult were generally assumed to be legitimate, and Revelation incorporates the exaggerated idea of miracle-working as a demonstration of such legitimacy. But as the writer builds up the notion of legitimacy through miracles, he undercuts it by appealing to the traditional idea that miracles can be performed by false prophets as well as true prophets. The animation of a statute could be considered an act of sorcery, which was socially deviant and dangerous. Again, the idea is that what appears either impressive or benign is portrayed as insidious and dangerous—something to be resisted.

The aristocratic supporters of the cult would not have had the power to impose a sentence of capital punishment as the land beast does. But the image exaggerates their support for the cult into violent suppression of those who refuse to participate. There were instances where the followers of Jesus had been put to death by Roman authority (2,13), and the parody magnifies such instances into a hallmark of support for Roman rule. The writer wants readers to see that this danger is not an aberration but an essential characteristic of a system in which imperial authority is made absolute. That in turn raises the question of how readers are to respond.

III. INCONGRUITY AND ETHICAL DISCERNMENT

The third aspect of incongruity emerges from the sharp distinctions between right and wrong that are reflected in the text, and the ambiguity in determining how these distinctions might inform practice. The most notable element in this passage is resisting the mark that the land beast imposes on people. Throughout Revelation, the writer is unequivocal in warning that those who receive the mark fall under divine judgment, and he seems to assume that readers will know how to correlate the mark with their own situations, even though interpreters have found it very difficult to discern what that would involve.

The seriousness with which the writer treats the mark is evident in 14,9-11, where those who receive the mark and worship the sea beast drink the wine of God's wrath and suffer torment with fire forever. In 16,2, they are subjected to a painful sore. Finally, those whom the land beast deceives into accepting the mark will not be raised during the first resurrection (19,20; 20,4). They will presumably be raised for the final judgment when the sentence of punishment in the lake of fire is meted out (20,11-15).

Given the urgency of resistance, one might expect the text to be clear about what steps the readers are to take. But here interpreters have found the imagery to be surprisingly ambiguous. Let me identify some of the major aspects of the land beast's imposition of the mark, which stand in some tension with each other, and then consider proposals as to how first-century readers might have correlated it with their social contexts.

1. The Mark in Its Literary Context

The mark (χάραγμα) that the land beast imposes combines several different fields of meaning. These are integrated in the image as portrayed in the text, but they draw associations from literary precedents and social experience in ways that were not commonly linked.

a) Belonging

In Revelation, a seal on the forehead of the redeemed indicates that they belong to God (7,3; 14,1). Conversely, the mark on the forehead or right hand of others shows that they belong to the beast (13,16; 14,9; 20,4). Other sources refer to a sign that the redeemed have on their forehead, indicating salvation, whereas the wicked either lack the positive sign or have a different sign identifying them for destruction²¹.

Although some assume that the tattooing of slaves also suggests belonging, that connotation is not clear. Slaves were not routinely tattooed to show ownership. In the Roman period, tattooing on the forehead was a form of punishment. If slaves were inscribed with the name of their master, the names were placed on the hand or neck, not the forehead. It is possible

²¹ Ezek 9,4; Ps. Sol. 15,6-9; Ign. Magn. 5,2; Apoc. El. 1,9.

that the mark on the forehead or hand of the beast's followers, or the name Babylon on the whore's forehead (17,5), could evoke the negative connotations of tattooing, but that practice does not contribute directly to the connotation of belonging²².

b) *Commercial participation*

Revelation contrasts those who have been “purchased” (ἀγοράζω) by the Lamb and bear the seal of God on their foreheads (5,9; 14,1-4) with those who bear the mark of the beast and can “purchase” freely in the marketplace (13,16). In the readers' social world, the term “mark” (χάραγμα) was used for impressions on coins, which often bore the Roman ruler's portrait, name, and titles. Such coinage would have been used with the hand during commercial transactions. A mark with the emperor's name and date could also be stamped on official bills of sale and property agreements²³.

c) *Worship practices*

The mark on the forehead could parody the Jewish practice of using phylacteries to bind God's commands to their forehead and hand. Readers might have seen the land beast demanding a blasphemous counter-action, requiring the sea beast's name to be placed on the forehead and hand²⁴. An alternative is that identifying marks were sometimes placed on devotees of a god. In the third century B.C.E. Jews in Alexandria had to have an ivy leaf, the sign of Dionysus, branded onto their bodies. Any who refused were executed (3 Macc 3,28-29)²⁵.

²² KOESTER, *Revelation* (n. 2), pp. 416-417, 594-595, 674. On the tattooing of slaves see also C.P. JONES, *Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, in *JRS* (1987) pp. 139-155; W.M. GUSTAFSON, *Inscripta in fronte: Penal Tattooing in Late Antiquity*, in *Classical Antiquity* 16 (1997) 79-105.

²³ For the χάραγμα on coins see Plutarch, *Mor.* 211B; 984F; YARBRO COLLINS, *Crisis and Catharsis* (8), pp. 126-127; J.N. KRAYBILL, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNTSup, 132), Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, pp. 138-139. On documents see A. DEISSMANN, *Bible Studies*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1909, pp. 240-247.

²⁴ I. BOXALL, *The Revelation of Saint John* (BNTC), Peabody, MA, Hendrickson – London, Continuum, 2006, p. 196; E. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 212.

²⁵ G.R. OSBORNE, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2002, p. 518; REDDISH (n. 11), *Revelation*, 260.

The writer combines these varied fields of meaning in a single image, conveying the sense that one's manner of participating in commerce will reflect whether one belongs to God or to God's opponent. The way people approach practices of buying and selling is shown to be inseparable from their approach to worship. That much seems clear in the text, but the challenge is translating that fusion of fields of meaning into a response in a social context.

2. *The Mark and the Readers' Social Context*

Much of the discussion about the mark of the beast has focused on the meaning of the number six hundred sixty-six, but here our concern is how people might have imagined that the beast from land would impose the mark, and how the mark could be correlated with their social context. Here are two ways in which recent interpreters have dealt with that question.

a) *The mark as a symbol of pressure from trade associations*

In Asia Minor there were associations of those in the same trade, textile and leather workers, dyers, potters, gold and silversmiths, etc. Such associations sometimes dedicated monuments to emperors and officials in imperial administration, and their gatherings could include prayers or other religious rites. Linking the mark of the beast to commerce may point to the way Christians experienced pressure publicly to identify with the emperor if they participated in trade organizations²⁶.

At the same time, the associations were voluntary organizations that did not actually govern the public market or oversee the economic affairs of their members. Buying and selling was not limited to the members of these groups. For example, traveling merchants sold goods at public fairs, and no one needed to belong to a guild in order to purchase goods²⁷. One might

²⁶ On the trade associations in Asia Minor see HARLAND, *Associations* (n. 1). On correlating trade associations with the mark see AUNE, *Revelation* (n. 19), vol. 3, p. 768; GIESEN, *Die Offenbarung* (n. 19), pp. 314-315; KRAYBILL, *Imperial* (n. 23), pp. 135-141.

²⁷ On trade associations and the range of commercial practices in Asia Minor see A.H.M.JONES, *Roman Economy: Studies in Ancient Economic and Administrative History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1974, p. 43; T.R.S.

correlate the mark with the informal pressure exerted by trade organizations publicly to identify with the imperial cult. If so, it is exaggerated into making public acceptance of the cult a requirement for business dealings of all sorts.

b) *Using coins with the emperor's picture*

Imperial coins displayed the image of the emperor. For Jews opposed to Roman rule, coins bearing the emperor's portrait could be considered a violation of the divine command not to make a graven image (Exod 20,4-6). The gospels say that when Jesus responded to question about taxes, he had his questioners produce a coin, which bore the emperor's portrait. The coin showed their connection to the imperial system (Mark 12,13-17 par.).

In this approach, the most direct correlation is between the mark on the coin or document and the right hand, which would typically have been used when conducting business transactions. The idea of the beast placing the mark on the forehead would be a creative play on the commercial imagery, in order to bringing it into alignment with the overall literary patterns in the text. The idea is that using an imperial coin with the hand is functionally equivalent to having a demonic mark on one's forehead, which in turn is the opposite of receiving the salvific seal of God on one's forehead elsewhere in the book²⁸. Each of these proposals has merit, but it remains uncertain as to how clear either connection would have been to first century readers, raising issues of how they might discern the significance of the imagery.

3. *The Problem of Imagery and Ethical Discernment*

Revelation makes sharp distinctions between the allies of God and the agents of evil. Through the use of imagery, the writer calls readers to be true to God and the Christian

BROUGHTON, *Asia Minor*, vol. 4 of *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, Paterson, NJ, Pageant, 1959, pp. 868-881.

²⁸ YARBRO COLLINS, *Crisis* (n. 8), pp. 126-127; KRAYBILL, *Imperial* (n. 23), pp. 138-139; D.F. TAYLOR, *The Monetary Crisis in Revelation 13,17 and the Provenance of the Book of Revelation*, in *CBQ* 71 (2009) 580-596; MURPHY, *Fallen Is Babylon* (n. 20), pp. 312-313.

community, and to resist compromise with powers that threaten that commitment. Yet many aspects of the imagery in Rev 13,11-18 do not correspond directly to the readers' social situation. That phenomenon raises questions for interpretation. How would readers discern what to do on the basis of such imagery? To what extent does the portrayal of the beast from the land *define* a course of action and to what extent does the image *open* prospects for various kinds of responses?

Earlier in Revelation, John made it clear that the followers of Jesus are not to eat food that has been sacrificed to Greco-Roman deities (2,13.20). But what would it mean to refuse the mark of the beast, even if it meant not being able to participate in commerce? If one construes the mark as pressure to show public support for imperial rule as a condition for participation in a trade organization, then does one avoid the mark by refusing to join an organization? Or if the mark is identified with coins or documents bearing the emperor's image, then are the faithful to resist the mark by avoiding any use of such coins or documents?

We are left wondering how John expected people to make a living or support their families. Did he envision the followers of Jesus essentially disengaging from society altogether? Were they to limit transactions to barter arrangements or did he envision other options? Despite the clearly negative quality of the mark and the urgency in resisting it, the imagery is remarkably difficult to translate into a specific course of action²⁹.

Rhetorically, the image of the beast from the land indicts those who support the imperial cult and pressure others to do so, but the image also leaves much to the readers' discernment as to how one would follow an alternative course of action. Revelation shapes the readers' perspectives by making sharp distinctions, but having done so the writer places a remarkable amount of responsibility on the readers themselves to determine how to put it into practice.

²⁹ HARLAND, *Associations* (n. 1), p. 262.

IV. INCONGRUITY BETWEEN RECONSTRUCTED AND ACTUAL ANCIENT READERS

Reception history can contribute to the process of biblical interpretation by enhancing our awareness of the assumptions we make when interpreting a text. It is striking that interpreters in the second and third centuries, who lived under imperial Rome, did not construe the image in the way we assume that first-century readers would have done. Whereas current interpreters generally assume that the beast from the land should be taken in a collective sense as a critique of practices in the readers' immediate social context, the second and third century interpreters assumed the beast would be an individual, who would come in the future³⁰.

There is incongruity between modern assumptions about what our reconstructed readers in the late first century would have seen in the image and what actual readers in the second and third centuries understood. The incongruity is notable because second and third century readers like Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Victorinus were living under Roman rule. Some of the differences could be attributed to the early church's desire to find a more secure place under the empire, but other differences reflect different understandings about the way imagery functions.

1. *An Individual Rather Than a Collective Figure*

Irenaeus assumed that the beast from the land would be an individual false prophet. One reason for concluding that the image pertains to an individual was literary: Revelation contrasts the beasts from sea and land with Christ the Lamb. Since Christ was an individual, Irenaeus assumed that each of the beasts in Revelation would be individuals. A second reason was that Irenaeus was trying to discern coherence between a number of early Christian writings, which spoke of Christ's great opponent in individual terms. He identified the beast

³⁰ On the value of Wirkungsgeschichte see U. LUZ, *Matthew 1-7* (Hermeneia), Minneapolis, MN Fortress, 2007, p. 63. On the second and third century interpreters noted here see B. MCGINN, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 58-64.

from the sea in Rev 13,1-10 with the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess 2,1-12 and the “antichrist” mentioned in the Johannine Epistles³¹. The resulting figure was known as Antichrist.

The beast from the land is understood to be the Antichrist’s associate, and therefore he too is construed as an individual. Irenaeus refers to the beast from the land as the Antichrist’s “armor-bearer” and concludes that the figure’s primary role is that of false prophet, which is the term used for this figure elsewhere in Revelation (*Haer.* 5.28.2; cf. Rev 16,13; 19,20; 20,10). In Irenaeus’s interpretation, a major aspect of the land beast’s identity is performing miracles. He is regarded as a kind of sorcerer, who works through demonic agency, and that emphasis on magic is designed to discredit the figure in Irenaeus’s judgment.

Hippolytus agrees that the beast from the land should be understood as an individual because he is a counterpart to Christ, who is an individual. But Hippolytus insists that the beast from the land is the Antichrist, rather than the Antichrist’s associate. He argues that the land beast will be an individual political ruler, and that the two horns of the monster signify the dual roles of Antichrist and false prophet. Since the beast has two horns like a lamb, the imagery shows that he will make himself like Christ the Lamb and put himself forward as a king.

Hippolytus takes erecting the statue in a literal sense and sees it as analogous to the kind of tyrannical political rule that was noted in the book of Daniel (*Antichr.* 49). He expects the land beast to place a golden statue in the Jerusalem temple, citing literary precedents from Daniel about a golden statue and desecration of the temple (Dan 3,1-6; 9,27; 11,45). He notes that such actions were to occur again at the end of the age, which he assumes will be the time of Antichrist (Matt 24,15). Other elements are integrated into this general picture of the land beast as a ruler. Whereas Irenaeus took animating the statue to be sorcery, Hippolytus interprets that aspect of the image metaphorically as an indication of oppressive of political rule. He equates the land beast’s animating of the statue with the sea beast’s dying and being raised. Both have to do with reinvigorating tyranny.

³¹ The Johannine Epistles use the term “antichrist” in the singular for one who denies Christ and for the source of the spirits that lead people into false belief (1 John 2,22; 4,3; 2 John 7). But the term can also be used for multiple figures, known as “antichrists” (1 John 2,18). On the interplay of individual and collective understandings of the term, see MCGINN, *Antichrist*, pp. 54-56.

2. *Resisting the Mark*

Irenaeus gives considerable attention to the significance of the number six hundred sixty-six, which is identified with the mark of the beast. He maintains that the number sums up the whole phenomenon of apostasy, which took place during the entire six thousand years of the world's existence (*Haer.* 5.28.2). He recognizes that the number is to be identified with a person's name, but cautions that it can actually apply to many different names, so that at present no one knows what the name might be (5.30.1-3). He assumes that when the Antichrist comes at some point in the future, people will be able to use the number to help discern his identity, in order that they might "avoid him, being aware of who he is" (5.30.4). But he does not venture to guess what it might mean for the land beast to impose such a number on people or how they would resist receiving such a mark.

Hippolytus again differs in that he correlates imposition of the mark with specific practices. His interpretive lens combines literary precedents with Greco-Roman practice. He recalls that during the Maccabean period, Antiochus Epiphanes decreed that Jews had to celebrate the king's birthday by participating in the sacrifices, and during festivals of Dionysus they had to wear head wreaths of ivy and join in the processions (2 Macc 6,7). By extension, Hippolytus concludes that the mark itself corresponds to the Greco-Roman practice of setting up incense pans which can be used for sacrifices. The tyrannical ruler portrayed as the land beast will require the incense to be offered by anyone wanting to participate in commerce. He then connects Revelation's mention of the mark on the forehead with the wearing of the wreath—in this case not of ivy but of fire (*Antichr.* 49).

So Irenaeus takes the image of the land beast as a warning about a false prophet and the number on the mark to be both a symbol of apostasy throughout the ages as well as a specific name that is not currently discernible. But he offered no comments on how the mark would be imposed or how one might resist it. Hippolytus closely followed Irenaeus in his interpretation of the number, but he differed in assuming that the image of the land beast warned about a tyrant, who would compel incense to be offered for people to participate in commerce. Unlike many modern interpreters, neither of the ancient writers suggested connections with trade associations or imperial coinage, even though those elements were part of their actual social

contexts—and none of the other Christian writers from the second and third centuries makes such correlations with commercial practices either³².

3. *Future Rather Than Present*

Both Irenaeus and Hippolytus also differ from the current interpretations noted above in that they assume that the land beast will come in the future. In their judgment, the image did not correspond to a present reality. It is striking that even though current interpretation emphasizes the anti-imperial dimensions of the imagery, the writers who lived under imperial rule did not do so. That is all the more significant, since Irenaeus became bishop of a congregation at Lyons, where Christians were publicly harassed and killed³³.

One might account for the difference between the modern reconstructions of late first-century readers and the views of actual second and third century readers by positing a change in the agenda of certain leaders of the church. Irenaeus, for example, did not want Christians to be perceived as a political threat. Therefore, even though he noted possible connections between the number on the mark and a name like Lateinos, he was careful to note that government was established by God and should be obeyed. He relegated the warnings in Revelation to a future time, insisting that the Antichrist and his armor-bearer would arise after the dissolution of the empire. That instilled a sense of vigilance in the readers, while allowing them to remain dutiful subjects of Rome (*Haer.* 5.24.1; cf. Hippolytus, *Antichr.* 50).

But the interpretations of the second and third centuries also highlight the difficulties that interpreters face when trying to correlate Revelation's imagery with social realities. Whether the imagery is related to the present or the future, readers still face the challenge of taking an image of a lamb-like beast and relating it to some kind of social setting. The connections are never simple and direct. Hippolytus connected the mark to pans for sacrifice, while modern interpreters relate it to social pressure or coinage, and Irenaeus leaves it more

³² Among writers of the second and third centuries there is almost no discussion of the significance of imposing the mark. Victorinus follows Irenaeus in identifying the beast from the land as a false prophet, and he resembles Hippolytus in assuming that the land beast would actually set up a statue in the temple in Jerusalem. But he subsumes the imposition of the mark under general warnings against idolatry (*In Apocalypsin* 13,1-4).

³³ In the letter describing the situation at Lyons there is language reminiscent of Revelation, which refers to Jesus as the faithful witness or martyr and calls on the faithful to “follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 1,5; 14,4), and it identifies the wicked of Rev 22,11 with the persecutors (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.10, 58; 5.2.3).

vague as a warning against apostasy. The differences leave us wondering whether first-century readers would have had a clearer sense of what the imagery signified.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study of Revelation's portrayal of the beast from the land explores the role of incongruity at multiple levels. The fusion of incongruous elements within the text, and the use of bizarre imagery to shape the way of seeing one's social context are persistent features of this work. Revelation is often understood to operate with a dualistic worldview in which there are clear distinctions between God and God's opponents, and equally clear alternatives between aligning oneself with God or with the agents of evil. But the imagery actually requires a high level of discernment on the part of the readers. Instead of giving the readers simple directives on what to do or to avoid, the imagery shapes a way of seeing the world. The contrasts are clearer in the text than they would have been in the social settings in which the readers lived. By using an image like the beast from the land, the author warns the readers about the insidious connections between political authority, commerce, and loyalty to God. But the writer also leaves open the question of how specifically readers should respond.

John's visions work by shaping the basic commitments of the readers. His visionary rhetoric presses them to see things in a certain way and engages them in reflection about the implications of what they see. Revelation challenges readers to work out the implications of its message in both negative and positive ways. In a negative sense, people are called to resist the pressures to participate in commerce in ways that would compromise their commitments to God—but exactly how they would do that is not spelled out. Combining clarity in the overall framework with openness for the readers to explore the specific application contributes to the image's power to engage readers in ongoing reflection about the meaning of belonging to the Lamb.

Luther Seminary
2481 Como Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55108
U.S.A.

Craig R. KOESTER