



a division of Flower Girl Greetings, LLC
writings by Beth Ann Phifer



How the First-Century, Asia Minor, Jewish Christians Understood the Book of Revelation

3. Outline

Scene 2, Part 3 – An Open Door into Heaven Yeshua and the Kingdoms of the World (4-16:21)

Scene 1 – The Island called Patmos (1:9–3:20)
Scene 2 – An Open Door into Heaven (4–16:21)
Scene 3 – The Wilderness (17–21:8)
Scene 4 – A high mountain (21:9-10–22:21)

The 4 scenes (or sections) of Revelation are separated by the author's words **I was in the Spirit**.

In Scene 2, Part 1, the door opened into Yahweh's Heavenly Court and the opening of the 7 Seals.

In Scene 2, Part 2, we moved into the cycles of the Trumpets and Bowls and what it means to be a Faithful Witness. **In Scene 2, Part 3**, we address the nature of the Roman Empire and the kingdoms of this world in contrast to Yeshua (Jesus) the Lamb and Yahweh's Kingdom of Shalom.¹

The Political, Economic, Religious Cult of the Roman Empire (12-13)

The Good news of Yeshua is political, economically-oriented, and socially-interested. It has become self-interested, i.e. *my faith, my sins forgiven*. Although our personal relationship with Him is so important to us and to Him, the dominant vision in Revelation is –

The Faithful Witnesses who are transformed by the Slaughtered Lamb engage in the world.

The world is broken and in need of Him. After John described the flourishing Kingdom of Shalom in Chapters 4-5, he exposed the brokenness of the kingdoms of this world in Chapters 6-11. In Chapters 12-13, John shows us the unholy trinity of image bearing that opposes the Faithful Witnesses, Yahweh's people in this world:

- In wholeness, Yahweh gives His image bearers: **responsibility**, **resources**, and **relationships**.
- In brokenness, the unholy image bearers pursue: **abuse of power**, **abuse of resources (greed)**, and **abuse of relationship (perverted sex and manipulation)**.

The use of apocalyptic images to describe and expose the brokenness

Ancient Near East (ANE) Israelite authors embraced the language of the pagans around them to dialogue with them about the one true God. They used the common motif or myth of Leviathan (the sea serpent or dragon figure) as a caricature of broken life, a part of the created order but antagonistic to it. This dragon empowers, animates, and gives authority to beastly, human, worldly kingdoms and is the reason God's people suffer before their vindication.

In Greco-Roman, First-Century Asia Minor (FCAM), the Emperor Domitian called himself Apollo, a mythical god who had slayed a mighty python.

The Psalmists use these same images in their accounts of creation to tell the story of Yahweh, saying, "God is Creator and brings order to the chaos by crushing the heads." See Psalm 74:12-14; Psalm 104:26; and Isaiah 27:1.

Chapter 12 – The Opposition against Yeshua and His Children

In Chapter 12, John begins with the third account of the birth of Messiah, the Anointed One (after Matthew and Luke's accounts). John describes His birth with memorable apocalyptic images that illustrate what was happening in the heavenlies. We see the furious, threatened dragon who pursues the Messiah but is crushed after His vindicating suffering, death, and resurrection. So, the dragon turns to make war with Messiah's offspring but can do so only for a *limited time* (the time defined in Scene 2, Part 2, Page 3). The Faithful Witnesses are the spiritual offspring of the Messiah and face this war. John's audience understood his warning and challenge that the Roman Empire was after them. This dragon behind the chaos of the ages stands on the seashore as the first and second beast appear (12:17-13:1).

In apocalyptic symbolism, beasts are empires; heads and horns are rulers, families of rulers, or dynasties rising and falling; and crowns and diadems are the pretense of power.

Chapter 13 – The Merging of Religion with Political Allegiance

To describe the first beast, John merged the four beasts of the prophet Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:2-9) into one beast that resembled a leopard with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion to represent a militaristic figure who is worshipped. This beast is *the opposite of* and *opposed to* the nonviolent, self-sacrificing Lamb, Yahweh's Messiah. The FCAM Jewish Christians were familiar with Daniel's vision and would have identified real people and events in the Roman empire in connection with this beastly image, such as the emperors Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian who kept and gained their power through worship.

In verses 13:2-10, the first beast (a political beast from the sea) abuses his power using manipulation, coercion, force, and blasphemy (lies and revilings). In verse 11, the second beast (a religious beast from the land also called the false prophet – see 16:13) is used by the first beast to create worship (a cultic religion of allegiance). The worship structures solidify the power of the first beast by requiring allegiance to the faithful provision of the empire; they were the trap that allowed the second beast's manipulation to become a stronghold. A head of the first beast was fatally wounded and healed.

In the late 60s prior to the suicide of Nero, the stability of the Roman empire collapsed (the fatal wound of 13:3). A succession of three leaders came in less than a year. Vespasian, a Roman general, returned to Rome from Palestine and became the new emperor. He commissioned his son Titus to take his job as general. His other son was Domitian. It was as if the empire came back from the dead. The worship of these men as gods solidified the empire. (The wound was healed.)

Within this political, religious stronghold, no one in the empire could buy or sell without giving their allegiance to the emperor; survival depended on compliance. John saw the injustice. The emperor (the first beast) was dependent on the religious, ritual system of allegiance.

The emperor made the gods look supernatural. In one temple, a priest could enter through a trap door behind a large idol and speak through an opening, making the statue of the emperor come alive once a sacrifice had been made.

An inscription found near Pergamum reads, "The almighty Nero Ceasar, Alpha and Omega... of the land and the sea Kurios (Lord)" (See 13:15-17)

Calculating the Number of the Beast

Yahweh's Kingdom is countered by the pretenses of the Roman empire. Although the word *Antichrist* is not in the Bible, the emperor Nero was anti-Messiah. He reigned from 54 to 68 CE before the time John wrote the Apocalypse, but he cast a shadow over the empire and represented all the worst of human beastly power in his arrogance, debauchery, and madness. He was nicknamed *beast* by his own people, which is probably why John used the term to refer to the Roman Empire. Nero thought of himself as the "king of the kings of the earth." He set fire to Rome in 64 CE to create a new city, Neropolis, accusing the Christians because they ascribed to a different Lord. Peter and Paul may have died near this time.

John may have referred to Nero as the beast by using the number 666 (13:18). *Gematria* (gem ah tree' ah) is an association of Greek and Hebrew letters to a corresponding number. It was a common practice in FCAM to use numeric values as codes to communicate messages or names. The name *Kaiser Neron* (Caesar Nero) has letters corresponding to the numerical values that add up to 666.

An N was added to Nero (Neron) because people using the Greek and Hebrew languages did not like their names to end with a vowel, so they would add an N. Some ancient manuscripts use the number 616 instead of 666, because the N letter was equal to 50, so – Nero (666) – N (50) = 616. This *gematria* is not verifiable proof that John was referring to Nero with the number; however, since John's purpose was to expose and identify evil, it is possible.

Yeshua in Contrast as the Slaughtered Lamb, King (14-15)

Chapters 14-15 – Another glimpse into Heaven and preparation for the pouring of the bowls

The Lamb is standing on Mount Zion with His cleansed Faithful Witnesses made blameless by His blood. Ha satan can no longer bring a charge against them (Romans 8:31-34)! They have His Name and the Father's Name written on their foreheads, and they sing a new song!

Angels declare the Good News of the Kingdom of Shalom to all people, as well as the judgment on the beast and those who gave allegiance to it. Reapers with sharp sickles begin the judgment.

Just as the Faithful Witnesses are marked with His Name on their foreheads as a seal (14:1), those who gave allegiance to the beast are marked (14:11). The words "Here is the perseverance of the saints" interlace the verses of Revelation. This is the time – the *limited time* – of their/our suffering. Knowing it is limited, we can persevere.

Chapter 16 – The bowls poured out and preparation for the final judgment

The angels pour out the 7 bowls. (See Scene 2, Part 2, Page 2 of this study for detail.) In verses 16:13-14 after the sixth bowl is poured, the destructive, demonic frogs coming from the mouths of the beasts is the picture of their own evil turning on themselves; the "spirits... go out to the kings of the whole world to gather them together for the war of the great day of God the Almighty" – their final judgment.

The demonic frogs gather the kings at Armageddon. *Armageddon* is mentioned once in Revelation 16:16. It is the Hebrew *Har-Magedon*. *Har* is *mountain*. The plains of Megiddo at the foot of Mount Megiddo were the common theatre of war for the ancient Israelites. The beasts, their fury, and their followers are gathered there for war that results in their own judgment as we will see in the next Scene (3). *Har Megiddo* is a symbol of humanity's hostility against God and of the gathering place for judgment. It is *not* a prediction of a worldwide cataclysmic war.

In the next scene, Scene 3, we will enter the Wilderness where final judgment finally comes.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- How are God's children targeted and threatened today by the kingdoms of this world?
- What political and religious powers in our world collude to create an allegiance using coercion, manipulation, force, and lies?
- How does Scene 2 challenge us? How does it comfort us and bring us hope?

Endnote: ¹*Shalom* is a Hebrew greeting offering a blessing upon every part of a person's life. It is wholeness in our bodies, emotions, mind, relationships, provision, and environment. It is stability, contentment, fulfillment, restoration, and reconciliation. Isaiah prophesied of the Prince of Shalom hundreds of years before He was born. "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall rest upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (Shalom)." (Isaiah 9:6)