

- Seven visions of victory

- A mighty cosmic battle

Jesus is the conqueror of the dragon. We must remember that John is presenting to us seven visions of victory. A new scene in heaven became visible^{□1}. Revelation 12:1–17 introduced the main characters of a mighty cosmic battle. A woman (the people of God) is persecuted by a dragon (Satan). She gives birth to a child (our Lord Jesus Christ) and the child is taken to a place of safety, while the woman herself is protected in the wilderness^{□2}. The dragon loses his position in heaven^{□3} and heaven rejoices at his defeat^{□4}. The dragon then turns his anger on the woman and her children^{□5}.

After these key figures have been introduced John sees seven visions concerning the conflict between the dragon and the people of God. (i) The dragon receives help from a beast from the sea^{□1}. (ii) Further help for the dragon comes from a beast from the land^{□2}. (iii) The children of God are pictured as people who are in the company of the Lamb of God, upon Mount Zion^{□3}. (iv) A fourth vision tells of the coming judgement of God and the fall of a third friend of the dragon, Babylon^{□4}. (v) The judgement of God is pictured as a time of harvest^{□5}. (vi) The last plagues bring God’s anger to completion^{□6}. Then (vii) a seventh vision shows us the entire people of God in their victory over Satan^{□7}.

We have reached the point where a second friend of the dragon is seen. *11 Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like unto a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon.*

- A second friend of the dragon

1. Satan uses false religion to persecute the people of God

1. Satan uses false religion to persecute the people of God. The second beast is false religion, even false ‘Christian’ religion. Satan likes to send persecuting governments against the church (represented in the beast from the sea). He also likes to send perverted and false religion (represented in the ‘beast from the earth’). The ‘beast from the earth’ looks like a lamb. Satan brings along something which resembles the Christian faith, with its Saviour, the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet the creature that looks like a lamb speaks with the voice of the dragon. Imitation Christianity has always persecuted the people of God. When a fake Christianity is allied to a persecuting state there is inevitably suffering for the people of God. State churches have sometimes burned Christians to death! *12 It used all the authority of the first beast, standing in his presence. And it compelled the earth and those who live on it to worship the first beast, whose deadly injury was healed.* False religion stands in the presence of pagan government wanting and waiting to do its will. It forces worship of the state-sponsored religion. The picture-language here comes from Nero whose persecutions came to an end but then were revived in later Roman emperors. The persecuting power received a deadly injury (Nero committed suicide) but then continued its work.

- The second beast

- Resembles the Christian faith but fake

- Allied to a persecuting state

2. False religion uses magic arts and fake miracles

2. False religion uses magic arts and fake miracles. *13 And the beast performed great signs, even making fire to come down from heaven to earth in the presence of people watching.* False religion can produce miracles. Although the word of God can be supported by miracles we must remember that other agencies can produce miracles as well! In medieval times the persecuting medieval church had shrines dedicated to Mary where convincing ‘miracles’ had a powerful effect on ordinary people who were encouraged to worship Mary! Today separating true and false claims to the miraculous is more difficult than ever, and it seems that almost every preacher that comes along (regardless of what he preaches) wants to display his miracles on TV! But miracles prove nothing. The message preached is what is to be checked. The ‘beast from the earth’ is very charismatic! Of course I am not against **charisma** – the power of the Holy Spirit – but ‘beastly’ preachers can be very deceptive with their tricks. Our text goes on to say: *14 And because of the signs which it was allowed to perform on behalf of the beast it deceives the people who live on the earth.*

- As in medieval times

- Separating the true and false today is difficult

- Check the message preached

□1	11:19
□2	12:1-6
□3	12:7-9
□4	12:10-12
□5	12:13-17
□1	12:18-13:10
□2	13:11-18
□3	14:1-5
□4	14:6-13
□5	14:14-20
□6	15:1
□7	15:2-4

3. False religion allied to persecuting government becomes a self-worshipping idolatry

• Looking for a contemporary literal identification is forgetting John's original readers!

• The essential point is what happens when false religion allies with extreme tyranny

• 666 – a symbol, not a calculation

• It stands for human wickedness raised to its highest power

3. False religion allied to persecuting government becomes a self-worshipping idolatry. *The beast told them that they should make an image for the beast who had been wounded by the sword but then recovered.* ¹⁵And it was allowed to give life to the beast, that is, to an image of the first beast, so that the image of the beast could both speak and take action. The state-religion claims to speak miraculously for God or for the gods. Then it is able to demand that everyone who will not worship the image of the beast should be killed. ¹⁶And the beast takes action against everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and in slavery, to give them a mark on their right hand, or upon their forehead. We must remember that this is symbolism and a vision. The kind of interpretation that looks for a literal identification mark (a credit-card, a computer, even a car licence number or 666 in one's telephone number!) is forgetting that John's **original** readers were also meant to be helped by the book of Revelation as well as the modern reader – and in a few years' time today's utilities will be replaced by something else! The point is simply that false religion allied to persecuting government becomes an extreme tyranny and demands that its followers and opponents be identified. (Even recently a Moslem country has tried to demand that its Hindu residents wear distinctive clothing.) It is done in different ways at different times. Such tyrants want every kind of person to submit to their demands, religious and political. It invariably persecutes the Christians. It wants even to discriminate against them economically. ¹⁷The beast demands that no one should be able to buy or to sell, except the person who has the identifying mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of his name. ¹⁸Here is something that needs wisdom. Anyone who has understanding, let them solve the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man: and his number is 666.

What is this '666'? (i) It is not the number of any person ancient or modern. It is not Hitler or Amin or Saddam Hussein or the Pope – although they have all at times been very beastly! It cannot be a symbolic way of representing **anyone's** number because there are simply too many candidates whose name can (if letters stand for numbers and a little juggling is done) be made to add up to 666. If we had to interpret this way the best guess would be that 666 means 'Caesar Nero' (which it does if spelled in Hebrew letters which also represent numbers). But true biblical interpretation requires spirituality not ingenuity. (ii) It is nothing to do with anything on a computer or credit card or the car licence number of some President in the West or in the East!

The number is a **symbol**, not a calculation. It stands for human wickedness raised to its highest power. We remember that man was made on the sixth day of creation. **This is 'the number of man'** (not 'a' man) – says our text. It means exactly what it says. It represents human-ness gone wrong. It is what men and women become when left to themselves. When pagan government is allied to fake Christianity the worst kind of human beastliness arises. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can conquer it.



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