

INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION - PART FOURTEEN

Chapter 13 completes a section which began in chapter 11 in which John presented his message against a background of the history of the events which were actually happening in his day. Thinly disguised in symbolic or 'cartoon' language is a description of the terrible consequences of the conflict between the Roman Emperors who claimed to be gods and the Jews and Christians who would worship only one God. The major events, which to those who lived through them must have seemed like the end of the world and of their hopes, were the fire of Rome in 64AD, probably started by the Emperor Nero, and certainly blamed by him on the Christians who were killed in great numbers, and the Jewish revolt in 66AD which lasted until Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, again with great loss of life in 70AD. Vespasian acted on Nero's instructions when he first commanded the Roman army in Israel. In 69AD Vespasian became Emperor and ordered his son Titus to complete the campaign against the Jews. Finally Titus, and later his brother Domitian, succeeded his father as Emperor and continued his policies of trying to suppress Jews and Christians. This was the stage and these were the major characters who played out the drama John was describing.

Chapter 11 referred to the 3 1/2 year siege of Jerusalem which must have seemed like the end of both the Old Testament Jewish witness and the New Testament Christian witness. Chapter 12 showed us how behind this first century holocaust was the dragon, the Devil, whose conflict with Eve in Genesis 3 had been continued when he tried to get rid of Mary and the infant Jesus. He had failed as he had failed at the beginning of history to take over heaven. Now he was taking it out on the woman, the bride of Christ, the Christian church but here too he would fail. Rome, for the moment, was his instrument.

To arrive in Israel with his invasion force, Vespasian had to come by sea.(13:1) He is pictured as a beast just like the dragon of chapter 12. Just as God had incarnated himself as Jesus so the Devil was now doing the same in the form of a series of Emperors who claimed to be gods. As we have already seen, Vespasian would be the tenth Caesar, ruling from Rome, a city set on seven hills, each crowned with a heathen temple. A similar picture had been used by Daniel to predict the four empires which would follow Babylon.(Dan.7) The fourth and most terrible of Daniel's beasts would be Rome. John used the three animals which represented the first three empires to picture the fourth one, Rome, as Rome had drawn on the strategies and weapons of those who preceded her.(13:2)

Nero's obsession with his own greatness had left the administration of the Empire in ruins at his death in 68AD. Three ineffective successors failed to unite and restore Rome and each lasted only a few months before being overthrown. It seemed like the Empire was fatally wounded at the beginning of 69AD when Vespasian came to the throne. He was a brilliant general, politician and administrator who rescued Rome from self-destruction in civil war and established a system which would last for nearly another 400 years. It was no wonder that unbelieving Romans worshipped him. He had saved them.(13:3,4) His successful campaign against Jerusalem would have had great popular support. The destruction of the temple would no doubt have been accompanied by sacrifices no longer to God, but to Vespasian.(13:5,6) His position as ruler of a vast empire which included about half the world's population of those days would have been undisputed.(13:7) Only those who belonged to Jesus Christ for eternity would have the courage and conviction to stand against the new religion.(13:8-10)

Vespasian was succeeded by his two sons, pictured here as the second beast with two horns. They were copies of him and so of the Devil they served. Titus as the general who completed the war against the Jews was the immediate instrument of their suffering and presumably the one who promoted the worship of his father.(13:11-15) The 'fire from heaven' may refer to the weapons used by Titus' army in the siege. Statues were built to Vespasian and their worship encouraged by his sons. It was a common practice in heathen temples in those days to have a spiritist medium, known as an oracle, give messages supposedly from the idol.

The mark on the forehead or hand of those who followed the beast needs to be related back to 9:4, and compared to the believers who have the seal of God on their foreheads. As we have already seen, this spoke of those who have a certainty in their minds about their relationship with the Lord, and as such did not need

to refer to a literal mark. It was usual in those days for a slave to be branded by his owner as a mark of ownership. Paul spoke in Gal.6:17 of 'bearing in my body the brand-marks of Jesus'. It does not mean that he had 'Jesus' tattooed on him, although he had no doubt scars from his suffering as a witness of Christ. Those who worshipped the Emperor would display the results of this in the way they thought and the way they did business.(13:16,17)

By giving a numerical value to each letter of the alphabet, a common practice in those days, any name could have a total number assigned to it. When the value of Emperor Nero's full name is calculated the answer is 666. He had begun what Vespasian and his sons continued. John's readers would have no difficulty working out who was implied in 13:18. To identify 666 with Nero does not of course rule out there being other people like Nero in the future with the same number. In fact about one name in a hundred would add up to this number. The name of the 1960s American President, Lyndon Baines Johnson, also adds up to 666, but that does not make him the Antichrist!

14:1 Q.1 John's vision returned to heaven, to timelessness, to allow suffering Christians on earth to see their circumstances in the context of eternity. Who have we already decided is the Lamb?(5:6, Jn.1:29) Where was Mt. Zion?(I Kgs.8:1) Who in 7:4 did we identify the 144,000 to be? What is the secret of their salvation from the terrible events on earth?

14:2,3 Q.2 Before whom did they sing their song? What significance was there in their audience? What meaning does this passage give to Christian hymns and songs? Which songs mean most to us throughout life? How was this also true of the writing of the Psalms?

14:4,5 Q.3 Were the 144,000 there on the basis of their good lives? If not, on what basis? What characterised their relationship with Jesus? And what marked their lives as being different?

14:6,7 Q.4 For whom was the angel's message? What have we already seen must happen before Christ's return? What do we need to start telling people about God? Why at this point in their ordeal are they given this reminder? Why do we sometimes need the same reminder when things are tough?

14:8 Q.5 We presume that at the time of writing, Jerusalem had just fallen to Rome. What then was the angel announcing? Which Babylon was being referred to here?(I Pet.5:13) Why would John use this way of speaking? What had Babylon always been about in the history of God's people? How would hearing this help John's readers?

14:9-13 Q.6 What warning was being given here to those who worshipped the beast and whose thinking and behaviour were marked by it? What place was there for spelling this out when preaching the good news of Jesus Christ? What does this warning teach us will be the real issue on the day of judgement? How long will hell go on for? What encouragement would this passage be to Christians?

14:14-16 Q.7 Who was sitting on the white cloud? What do the cloud and the crown symbolise? For what was a sickle used? What does the sickle represent? (Matt.13:37-41) How does this explain the 'first fruits' in 13:4?(Lev.23:10; I Cor.15:20-23)

14:17-20 Q.8 What second image of harvesting was now used? What was the outcome of this harvest? How might these two harvests be related to the fate of believers and unbelievers?