

2 Mystery of the Seven Heads

Little if anything in the Apocalypse is as intriguing and even perplexing as the seven heads of the beasts described in Rev. 12, 13, and 17. Even within the Historical School no uniform interpretation exists. That identifying them would not be easy seems to be hinted at in the Bible itself by the words “Here is the mind which hath wisdom” (Rev. 17:9).

Referring to the chapter in which this statement occurs, William B. Engle points out that understanding its basics “is not contingent on identification of the heads.”¹ That is possibly true, and yet we can never be sure in advance what light the sharpening of our insight about any symbol may throw on other topics raised by the Apocalypse.

A serious defect of many analyses focusing on the heads is that they lack support from the Bible or are contradicted by it. They also often fail in relation to other criteria set out in the first chapter of this book (the “Seven Keys to Unlock the Mysteries of Revelation”).

In what follows, we briefly first refer to eight existing identifications—there are undoubtedly more—and why we find them unacceptable. Then, in the next chapter, we present our own interpretation.

Such an approach is necessary for many readers, who are probably acquainted with and possibly even puzzled by the alternative, conflicting explanations about the seven heads. The field is cluttered up with them and needs some preliminary clearing. Some, however, may consider this procedure too “negative,” if not tedious. For them, we suggest that they skip the discussion of the eight identifications and go straight to our interpretation in the following chapter. Afterwards, if they need to, they can always return to this one.

First, there is the view that the seven heads do not represent particular entities but simply “all political opposition to the people and cause of God on earth throughout history.”² But this idea is ruled out by a single verse, which proves that specific powers are meant: “Five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come” (Rev. 17:10).

Second, various nineteenth-century authors believed the heads referred to seven stages of Roman government. This is how Smith interpreted them in 1876. He said they were the “Kings, Consuls, Decemvirs, Dictators, Triumvirs, and Emperors,” plus “the Popes.”³ In 1905, Haskell echoed the same idea.⁴ They inherited it from older interpreters. For instance, in 1825 the British writer John R. Park (1778-1847) maintained that “the seven heads are kings, consuls, dictators, decemvirs, military tribunes, emperors, and popes.”⁵

All these men were no doubt also influenced by the fact that in the colleges and even high schools of their time Classical education still predominated. On a regular basis, students in the United States as in England and Europe had to learn Latin and study Roman history, both of which therefore loomed large in their mental world.

This hypothesis has become archaic and is simply out of date, especially owing to a more accurate view of the past, made possible by twentieth-century research. Nowadays we know that not Rome but Hellas created the great, if flawed, civilization of the ancient Mediterranean world. The pagan Romans—a practical but somewhat unimaginative people—were largely important for helping to spread and perpetuate this heritage. The Lord, in his great scheme of things, would surely not have dignified even their minor constitutional arrangements with so much prophetic attention. After all, the Greeks also had many forms of government. The interpretation of the seven heads as stages of Roman history has simply withered on the vine and need no longer be taken seriously.

For those that do not find that a sufficient reason for dismissing it, we add the following considerations.

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It is a commonplace of interpretation that the Antichristian beast depicted in Rev. 13 is a composite of the foursome from Dan. 7. Equating the seven heads with political trivia about ancient Rome does not fit in with this overall symbolic pattern, designed by God himself.

If in Rev. 17, the seven heads mean seven forms of Roman government, they must also do so in Rev. 12, which deals with the great red dragon. Primarily this represents Satan, but many prophetic expositors have in addition interpreted it as a symbol of pagan Rome. And yet all seven heads wear *crowns* (Rev. 12:3)! At least four types of republican Roman government, the “consuls, decemvirs, dictators, triumvirs,” were fiercely non-monarchical. None of these functionaries would ever have dared to wear a crown. Expelling the last monarch, an Etruscan, subsequent to the rape of the lady Lucretia, the Romans made it a deadly crime for anybody to call himself a king. Julius Caesar was assassinated on the mere suspicion of wanting to be one. This very point was also raised by the wily Scribes and Pharisees at the trial of Christ. They said to Pilate that if he acquitted Jesus, he would not be the emperor’s friend (John 19:12). It was a deadly threat, which cost the Redeemer his life.

A major defect of this view is the implication that the heads, and therefore also the horns, mean entirely different things in different Scriptures, Dan. 7, Rev. 12, Rev. 13, Rev. 17, as though these chapters were not related through their allusions and symbolism, which they obviously are. This would potentially leave the bewildered reader with a total of twenty-eight heads and forty horns, which is surely far too many.

Albert Einstein, who had closely studied the complexities of the physical universe, once declared, “The Almighty is subtle, but not malicious.” In this case, too, the Lord has not gone out of his way to be difficult with us; for he wants us to understand his warnings and encouragement intended for our welfare. About the Apocalypse, he gave an explicit instruction: “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:10).

We need to come up with a coherent picture, in which all the parts of our prophetic interpretation for Daniel and Revelation as a whole can be fitted together. Our explanation, yet to be presented, meets this criterion. The same cannot be said for any of the older interpretations dealt with in this chapter.

Yet it is profitable to note the reasons for identifying the seven heads with stages of Roman government and why it was popular in an older America—as an object lesson on how prophetic writers can be affected and misled by current preoccupations, and fall into the trap of the contemporary. The topic is also interesting for its own sake.

When the United States declared its independence in 1776 and eleven years later drew up its present Constitution, the ancient Classics—as these were understood at the time—had a distinctive influence on the form of government that the Founding Fathers decided to adopt. They had inherited elements of democracy from England, to which they added others that were home grown; but also, as Albert H. Marckwardt explains, “as a consequence of our break from English political tradition, we tended in our first flush of republican enthusiasm to look to Rome as a model.”⁶

This was especially evident in the Americans’ abolition of the monarchy and in deferring to the people, which reflected a pre-imperial Roman ideal⁷ and is made apparent by Latinate words like *republic*, *senate*, *senator*, *Capitol Hill*, the *veto* power, etc. The *eagle* emblem, incorporated in the grand seal of the United States is also derived from Rome. Since ancient times it has been a symbol “of empire, of courage, of military prowess.”⁸ Gaius Marius (157-86 BC), a very great general and seven-times consul of the Roman Republic,⁹ made it the only battle standard of its legions.¹⁰

Another expedient derived from that ancient people is making the American president commander-in-chief of the armed forces. During a national emergency, he can become, with Congressional approval, a virtual dictator, at least in military affairs. Of this, the Tonkin Gulf resolution during the Vietnam War provides a conspicuous example. It was passed on 7 August 1964 with a vote of 466 to 0 in the House and 88 to 2 in the Senate. It remained valid until 1970, when the senators repealed it, “realizing too late” that they had surrendered to Lyndon B. Johnson and his successor, Richard M. Nixon, “their powers in the foreign policy process by giving the president wide latitude to conduct the war as he saw fit.”¹¹ Americans never use the word *dictator*, as the ancient Romans certainly did. On the other hand, the latter, politically a more cautious people, restricted his powers, denying him simultaneous civil jurisdiction. They also limited his tenure to six months.¹² When they gave up this practice, as they most notably did in the case of Julius Caesar, their republic fell; and then the reign of the dictatorial emperors began.

The break with England during and after the Revolution was, however, only one reason why an older America doted on Rome. Another was the development of secondary education. Classical ideals formed part of the American Renaissance, and “in dozens of academies the classical course, with Latin and Greek language, literature, history, and geography for its subject matter, was the accepted preparatory curriculum for college work.”¹³

By the 1840s and 1850s, these influences extended from the eastern seaboard to the Mississippi, “dotting the new towns and cities with courthouses built like Doric temples, homes with columned porticos, college buildings reproducing the detail of the Parthenon.” Today its most notable residue is to be found in America’s place names, including eleven Romes, nine Corinths, and twelve Spartas.¹⁴

From the period of the Revolution onward, especially all things Roman were clearly reflected in older writings and art, such as painting and sculpture. For instance, George Washington, the indispensable man, was—as both Americans and Europeans saw him—a latter-day Cincinnatus: the ancient hero called from behind the plow, who accepted supreme, emergency powers when the existence of his people was threatened, yet afterwards humbly laid them down again.¹⁵ And Jefferson fixed “the nation’s architectural style as that of the Roman republic,” and “took the first steps that stamped America’s federal city as a Roman town.”¹⁶

The time during which the founding fathers and the next few generations lived was accordingly characterized by a “cult of antiquity.” This “was not, in the eighteenth century, confined to the learned.” Most people knew their ancient history, “much as medieval believers knew their biblical history, through ritual and icons and theater.”¹⁷ Furthermore, history had not yet been abolished as a separate subject in American schools.

This Classical approach is clearly and rather quaintly present in the first edition of the *Life of Washington* (1800) by Pastor Mason Locke Weems. It was an immensely popular book, yet its author could—without confusing ordinary readers—write a paragraph like the following: “Washington was pious as Numa, just as Aristides, temperate as Epictetus, patriotic as Regulus. In giving public trusts, impartial as Severus; in victory, modest as Scipio—prudent as Fabius, rapid as Marcellus, undaunted as Hannibal, as Cincinnatus disinterested, to liberty firm as Cato, and respectful of the laws as Socrates.”¹⁸ To modern Westerners, this is just abracadabra.

For people today, with their very different educational background, an interpretation of the seven prophetic heads as stages in ancient Roman government seems quaint and peculiar—if

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not a little unbalanced. After all, the ancient Republic of Rome endured for more than four hundred and fifty years,¹⁹ and its Empire for further centuries; but its other, earlier stages just briefly flitted into and out of existence.

A third, and Preterist, view of the seven heads has a kinship with the foregoing, because of its Classical preoccupation. It holds that they symbolize individual Roman emperors, an idea which Kenneth A. Strand has brilliantly refuted. He shows that up to John's time not seven but eleven such rulers—from Augustus to Domitian—sat on the imperial throne.²⁰

The editorial synopsis of his article ends by also debunking a fourth as well as a fifth interpretation.

According to the former, the heads refer to seven individual pontiffs from 1798 to the Second Coming. But since that date, when Pius VI suffered the anguish of arrest and exile at the hands of General Berthier, a little after the French Revolution, there have been not seven but fourteen popes.²¹ Therefore, proponents of this view have fancifully supposed that only pontiffs with uniquely different names are meant—although the Scriptures say nothing about this.

Others, no doubt aware that they cannot pick and choose their popes in such an arbitrary way, have varied this view. They add together the seven heads and seven mountains of Rev. 17:9, 10, attaching importance to the word *there*. Alas, it does not exist in the Greek original, being supplied by the translators. A better alternative that agrees with the context would be “The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And *they* are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space.” In any case, the woman sits on seven and not on fourteen heads. What is more, John Paul II has now died. On 19 April 2005, he was succeeded by Benedict XVI, the *fifteenth* pope. So this interpretation has collapsed like the proverbial house of cards.

The similar fifth interpretation is that here the Apocalypse refers to seven popes since 1929, when the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini restored the Vatican to the papacy. This view is numerically more feasible, though also commonsensically less appropriate, because Rev. 17:10 refers to “kings,” a plural word that can hardly apply to the popes in the tiny Vatican of our time.

Even worse, this last view contradicts the message of the marvelous angel depicted in Rev. 10:1-10, who greatly resembles the glorified Christ that spoke to John on Patmos (Rev. 1:13—15). This is the same majestic being who in Dan. 12:6, 7 had sworn that “a time, times and a half” would elapse before the final stage of human history began. And now, in the Apocalypse, he again most solemnly raised his hand to heaven and uttered a second solemn oath by him who lives forever and ever: “that there should be time no longer” (Rev. 10:6). He announced the beginning as well as the end of those terrible 1260 year-days when the holy people would be persecuted and with which the last of the seven heads is closely associated. As for 1929, however momentous this date may be, it does not belong to the great prophetic time periods, all originally mentioned in Dan. 7-12. The last of them ended in 1844.

The preceding two interpretations are, moreover, unacceptable because “The Bible never uses animal heads or mountains as symbols of individual rulers”—which “rules out as unsound any attempt to identify the seven heads of Revelation with individual popes, living or dead.”²²

A sixth and more respectable explanation is that the seven heads stand for the great empires of history which have often oppressed the Lord's faithful followers. They are interpreted

as Egypt and Assyria, followed by Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Pagan Rome, and Papal Rome-Europe. However, as C. Mervyn Maxwell points out, “The prophecies of Daniel are our key to the interpretation of Revelation. Daniel gives us Babylon, Persia, Greece, Roman Empire, and the Roman Church, but says nothing about Egypt and Assyria.”²³ More than that, bringing these two powers into the picture undermines the interpretation that the Leopard beast is a composite of the four creatures in Dan. 7. Inter alia, it opens the way for fanciful views about the ten horns.

Maxwell in this has a good point. But we need to add another one: the book of Daniel depicts the Greeks as a fourfold entity, in three different contexts. In chapter 7, the leopard has four heads and not one. In Dan. 8, after the notable single horn has been broken, four horns come up out of the Grecian nation (vs. 22). Dan. 11:4 also mentions this fourfold division. Therefore, why would the Greeks in Revelation be represented by a single head?

A seventh view, espoused by Maxwell himself, maintains that the seven heads refer to (1) Babylon, (2) Persia, (3) Greece, (4) the Roman Empire, (5) Christian Rome, (6) Wounded Christian Rome, and (7) Christian Rome Revived.²⁴ Of these, the first four agree with Dan. 2, but do not harmonize with chapter 7; for the Grecian leopard has multiple heads. Furthermore, assigning *four* heads to Rome, with three for Christian Rome, is excessive and disallowed by Rev. 13:3: “And I saw *one* of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast” (emphasis supplied). When it revives, it is still the same head as it was before it received its deadly wound.

Allocating three heads to Christian Rome is also chronologically out of kilter with the angel’s explanation to John. As he was speaking, five of the heads had already fallen (Rev. 17:10). The Roman Empire was still in its early stages and must therefore be the *sixth* and not the fourth head.

Some expositors are well aware of this difficulty but seek to get around it through relativistic thinking. Maxwell asks, “So shouldn’t Revelation 17 be interpreted from the viewpoint of 1798/1844 and later, the era of the judgment and the end time?”²⁵ Nooo, it should not, unless we can prove that this is what the Bible teaches. The Scriptures, we maintain, say nothing about relativistic time frames, an idea that could—if generally adopted—play havoc with all prophetic exposition.

To illustrate a little further how problems can arise from shifting the time frame to the period after 1798, let us look at Joseph B. Pierce’s eighth interpretation. He says the last three of the seven heads are (5) Papal Rome, (6) the United States of America, and (7) “(Possibly) Germany during the Axis regime, under Adolph Hitler.”²⁶ This causes threefold confusion.

First, number (6) implies an amalgamation of the two-horned and the seven-headed beast, though Rev. 13 keeps them apart as separate entities. America in prophecy looms so large and becomes so important that no mere head can do justice to its end-time prominence. To it, the Apocalypse assigns an entire, separate beast—as it does to the papacy.

Indeed, since Pierce’s book appeared in 1975, the United States has grown immensely powerful. In 2003, its president, defying both the United Nations and much of world opinion, launched the Second Gulf War to crush the power of Iraq, with assistance from two Anglo-Saxon satellites, Britain and Australia. During the discussions leading up to this event, George W. Bush contemptuously brushed aside the combined opposition of Russia, France, and Germany. In the aftermath, books appeared, not simply to assert that the United States was now an imperial power, but to suggest just what kind of empire it may be.²⁷

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Second, number (7) in Pierce's scheme assigns a head to the country of Germany. But the books of Daniel and Revelation depict the European powers not as heads but as horns. (And Hitler as well as his Third Reich have long since vanished rather insignificantly into the past, like Napoleon in the nineteenth century—though at that time some expositors tried to fit *him* into the prophetic scenario of the Apocalypse!)

Third, as Pierce himself points out, his explanation entails “that the ten horns of Daniel's fourth beast cannot be identified with the ten horns of the three beasts having seven heads in the Revelation.”²⁸ This suggests a disjunction between those closely related books of the Bible. Separate sets of ten horns—and heads—are highly suspect. We have already discussed this, more than once, beginning with our opening chapter “Seven Keys to Unlock the Mysteries of Revelation,” under **Consistency** and **Prophetic Augmentation**.

The hypothesis of the movable time frame must also fall away, for several reasons. For one thing, it does not adequately explain why the Bible—after dealing with the heads—goes on to say, “And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition” (Rev. 17:11). More importantly, it fails to account for the contrasted order in which the books of Daniel and the Apocalypse presents the lion, the bear, and the leopard elements, though other writers on prophecy seem hardly to have noticed this point.

The different, reversed, sequencing of the lion, the bear, and the leopard elements of Rev. 13 pinpoints the prophet's vantage point in history. He lived and labored during the earlier, pagan stage of the Roman Empire, when Hellenic philosophy, culture, and syncretism predominated. This is why the leopard loomed so large in the creation of the papal Antichrist. Before the Greeks, it was the Medo-Persian Empire that ruled the ancient Middle East, and beyond them—further back—the Babylonians. This inverted order of presentation, as compared with Dan. 7, refutes the idea that the seven heads in the Apocalypse must be viewed from within a period many centuries after John would be dead and buried. Consequently, when the angel says of the seven kings that “five *are* fallen, and one *is*, and the other *is not yet come*” (Rev. 17:10, emphasis added) he clearly means they should be identified from within the prophet's lifetime.

A relativistic time shift is arbitrary, and unnecessary. Resorting to such a procedure is not unlike the operations in the story of Cinderella. Ambitious mothers, desperate to make the wonderful slipper fit their daughters' feet, rather painfully snipped away the excess flesh. No, let us, instead, adapt our interpretations to the prophecies, and not the prophecies to our interpretations.

If we assign to the Greeks not one but four heads, as is clearly done in Dan. 7, this makes it possible to see the seventh head as Christian Rome or Christendom, with the papacy as its outstanding feature—as will be shown in the following chapter. Then everything about the prophecy falls into place, though Pierce demurs: “the seventh head ‘. . . must continue a short space’” and points out that the papacy has on the contrary continued for a very long time.²⁹

So it has, but this expression needs to be seen against the background of other passages, especially the final promise by the ascended Redeemer: “Surely I come quickly” (Rev. 22:20). As already pointed out, the seventeenth chapter of Revelation parallels the twelfth one; the “short space” of the Antichrist echoes a statement applied to the great red dragon, Satan, who “knoweth that he hath but a short time” (Rev. 12:12).

For us, poor human beings with a life span so pitifully brief, how long the centuries of Antichristian oppression have been! But the viewpoint of other beings in the cosmos, including the great adversary who has lived for many millennia, is very different. This is even truer

of the One whose years are measureless: “For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night” (Psalm 90:4). He it is, too, that through the inspired apostle encourages us: “The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light” (Rom. 13:12). Paul wrote this passage more than 1900 years ago. For God, however, that was only a yesterday ago, and soon enough for us, too, it will be so.

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