

Revelation as Trilogy
The Two Powers
Chapter 13: The Unholy Trinity Attacks

Introduction: The war on God's people has begun and will be waged not just by the Dragon/Satan but by the Unholy Trinity. This Unholy Trinity will consist of the Dragon/Satan (anti-God), the sea beast who looks like it was slain but lives (anti-Jesus) and the beast who speaks for the Dragon and makes fire come down from heaven (anti-Spirit). The war will be waged on two different fronts. There will be indirect attacks in which the Unholy Trinity will attempt to deceive the inhabitants of earth and direct attacks where there is physical persecution of believers. If we remember the letters to the seven churches, we will recall that these are the two fronts on which these churches are being attacked. To be clear, there has been much ink spilled attempting to connect these three beasts with historical figures (Roman Emperors, the Pope, Hitler, etc.) or theological beliefs (Calvinism, Arminianism, Catholicism). Each of these stand accused because one group or another believes them to be either intent on destroying God's people or leading God's people astray. Yet, by not linking this Unholy Trinity to any one person/theology, readers will be open to seeing this Unholy Trinity at work in their world.

The Story: The story begins with the arrival of the second beast. It rises out of the sea (chaos) and appears to be the perfect picture of a ruler (seven heads meaning perfection, horns representing power and blasphemous names representing its opposition to God). Again though, its image is of a perverted, unnatural animal, meaning it has taken what God has created and mutated it. Next, just as God gave power to the Lamb, the Beast/Satan gives its power to the sea beast. Additionally, the sea beast appears to have a mortal wound that has healed, just like Jesus and the nails in his hands. These signs fool "the whole earth" and they follow the beast. People then wonder, "Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?" This question is answered when the beast is given the power to attack heaven and earth, to conquer the saints and attain power over every tribe and nation on earth. The result is that the only people who do not worship the beast are those whose names have been written in the book of life of the Lamb. A warning is then given to believers that they will be persecuted, even to the point of death.

We now encounter the third beast. It has two horns like a lamb (remember the connection between the Spirit and Jesus) and speaks like a Dragon/Satan (remember that the Spirit speaks for God). This beast makes the people of the earth worship the sea beast just as the Spirit helps people worship Jesus. It can even make fire come down from heaven, just as the Spirit came as tongues of fire at Pentecost. This deception leads people to worship the image of the sea beast to which the third beast has given the power of speech (just like the Spirit gives the church the gift of tongues). Finally, this beast causes people to be given the mark of the beast, 666. Without this mark, people cannot buy or sell. Again, there has been far too much discussion about the identity and meaning of the number 666. As with attempts to associate the Unholy Trinity with particular people or beliefs, which will restrict how we can see the work of the Unholy Trinity in our present moment, the same is true here. One way to understand this number is to see 666 as evil's best attempt to imitate 777, meaning the perfect nature of God. In other words, evil can come close to imitating God and God's perfection, but ultimately it will fall short.

Reflection: The writer of Revelation seems to clearly understand that the battle between the forces of God (good) and the forces of Satan (evil), are waged on two different fronts. They are waged on the obvious front of physical intimidation and death. This front was one of which the first readers would have been aware because many of them lost their lives because of their faith. The battle is also waged, however, on the front of deception. As one reads the chapter, note the power of deception. It can sway all the earth's people and nations. It can lead people away from the worship of God to the worship of the beasts. In other words, deception is far more powerful than intimidation. For most of us reading this book, this is the front on which evil is most at work around us.

Questions:

1. Where do you see deception at work in the world trying to lead people away from God?
2. Where have you seen individuals attempting to have people worship them?
3. Where do you see society's susceptibility to being deceived?