

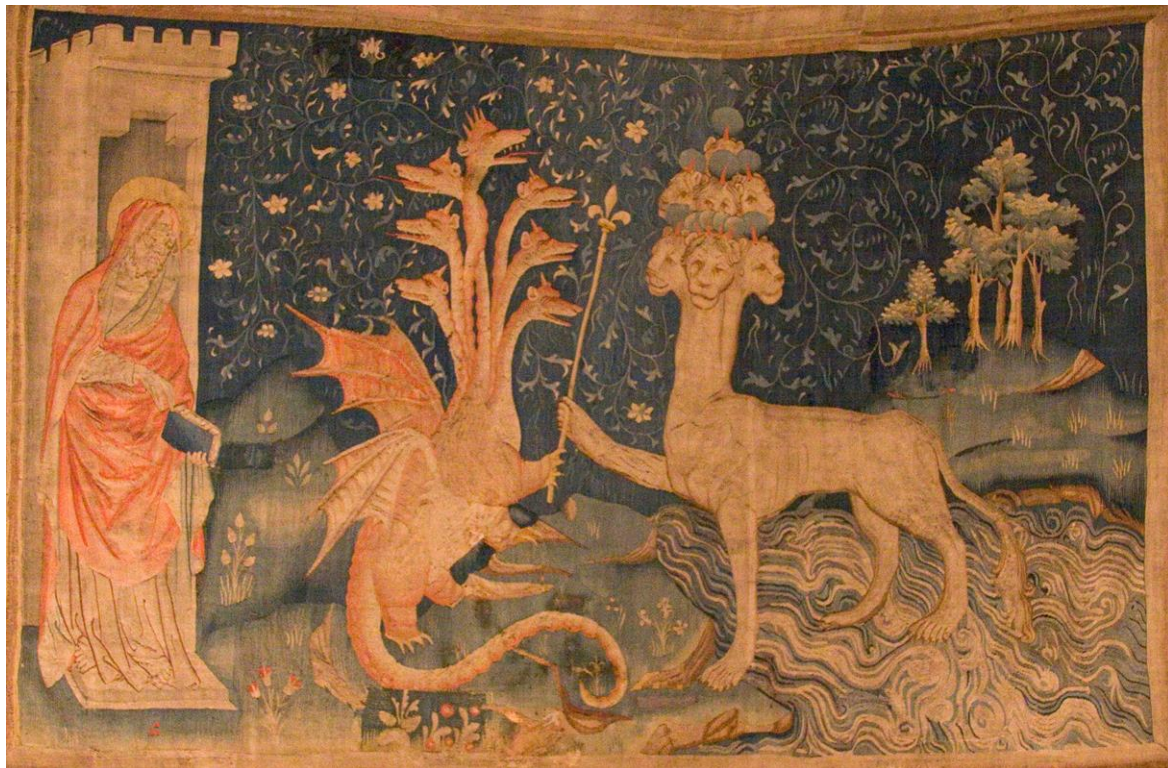
Our Beasts

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

4th August, 2019

[Overview of Daniel](#)

Daniel 7:2-7 / Revelation 1:9-11, 13:1-9



What do we think of when we hear the word, “revelation?”

I guess that would largely depend on the context in which we hear it.

If we hear it in casual conversation,

we probably would think of something being revealed,

seeing or learning of something

that we had previously been unaware of.

However, if we hear that word from a biblical context,
I bet we give that word a whole different meaning,
particularly when thinking about the last book of the canon.
We probably think of scary beasts, death, destruction and war,
cataclysms and the end times.
There certainly is a lot of vivid and dramatic imagery in that book,
mixed with a lot of symbolism, and metaphor.
It's a rich, deep read, that can be confusing and unsettling,
Throughout the ages, many have made into a detailed account of what is to come,
and in the last 150 years or so, that's been refined to the minutest detail,
with words like "rapture," "tribulation," and "left behind"
entering our vernacular.
However, like our earlier reading from Daniel,
which John of Patmos drew a lot from in his writing,
Revelation is what is called apocalyptic literature.
That genre of writing does not have as its purpose a literal interpretation,
but it achieves its meaning more through symbolism and metaphor;
by reading "between the lines."
As a scholar of the Bible,
I have previously gone out of my way to avoid Revelation
because of the many ways it can be interpreted,
and the often confusing imagery and symbolism it presents.
However, I'm also intrigued.

So for the next several weeks,
 I will be dragging you along with me
 as we dive into this text
 and see what meaning we can draw from it.

I mentioned that Revelation is apocalyptic literature,

but it is also a letter that was constructed

to the seven main churches of Asia Minor.

REVELATION: ROME & THE SEVEN CHURCHES

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John was exiled to the island of Patmos,
 most likely by a local Roman official
 for disturbing the peace much in the same way Paul
 was run out of town over and over again

for encouraging people to buck the status quo.

He's writing to a series of churches

that were in the heart of the Greco-Roman world,

firmly ensconced in the Roman way of doing things.

From the way he orders his letter,

you get the sense that he was a traveling evangelist like Paul,

as he ordered his addresses to the church

in the same way you would ride a circuit

to hit all the churches in one loop.

First, Ephesus near the coast, then on around the circle to Laodicea.

To understand how this letter would be conveyed,

it's important to consider what churches were like

in the latter part of the first century and the beginning of the second.

This was long before dedicated church buildings were even a thing.

Like in Paul's time, these were groups of followers

that met in people's homes, probably not large groups.

The majority of them would be illiterate in written Greek.

So they would gather to hear someone

who had the benefit of education read aloud the letter to them.

John had to write in a format and genre that they would be familiar with,

one that had drama that would keep them engaged.

Reading Revelation for them wasn't an act of learning about worship,

it was a form of worship itself.

In fact, some scholars have argued that the central theme of this book
is what ideal worship should look like,
with all the heavenly imagery of constant praise of God.

But that brings us back to this genre of apocalyptic literature,
which was fairly well-known and widespread in recent times for John's audience.
While the events of apocalyptic Daniel take place
over half a millennia prior to Revelation,
the book itself was written
in the century or so before Jesus was born.

So these kinds of stories were being circulated
and became popular for a variety of reasons.

Certainly one of their key features was the promise of hope
in the face of oppression and suffering.

They also validated the importance of maintaining one's faith,
and the providence of God
in caring for and rewarding the faithful.

And finally, through symbolism and metaphor,
they criticized the status quo of the empires of the day,
and illustrated the conflict between that way of life
and life in God's kingdom.

Which is what I'll be focusing on today,

the use of symbolic images in Revelation and what they mean for us.

You may have found it odd that I jumped right into the meat of this book

by going right to the “beast” images,
but so much of the story revolves around those images,
which are a continuation and expansion
of the imagery of Daniel.

It’s important to understand a little about Daniel
to appreciate the points presented in Revelation,
which is why we had a little Daniel primer earlier.

So let’s talk about the “beast.”



The image we are presented with is pretty fearsome:
a seven-headed creature that looks like a leopard, has feet like a bear,
and a mouth like a lion.

Hmm, sounds a little familiar doesn't it?

To quote our reading from Daniel:

“...the first was like a lion...

and there before me was a second beast which looked like a bear...

and there before me was another beast, that looked like a leopard...”

John of Patmos sees a single beast

that combines the horrific characteristics of all four creatures in Daniel's dream.



One way to understand these symbols is to read them like political cartoons.

Neither Daniel nor John was trying to be funny
 but they used these images to make a serious point
 by reducing nations or rulers or events
 to a few symbols or characters.

This political cartoon from World War 2 portrays Poland
 as a combination of Goldilocks and Little Red Riding Hood.
 Germany and the Soviet Union
 are in bed together through political alliance,
 conspiring to devour Poland
 by carving up that nation between them.

No one familiar with the political landscape of Europe in 1940
 (and those related fairy tales)
 would misunderstand the ominous meaning of that sketch.

Likewise, those who heard John's story,
 would not miss the meaning behind the symbols he dramatically illustrates.

The word *apocalyptic* literally means "unveiling"
 and these works use images of beasts, heavenly beings,
 and other fantastic symbols
 to represent political and religious entities.

Each of the beasts in Daniel represents subsequent empires
 that would dominate Palestine
 from the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in 586 BC
 to the beginning of Roman rule in 63 BC.

The beasts represent the domination

by Babylonia, Media, Persia, and finally Greece.

The final beast has ten horns,

which coincidentally matches the 10 rulers

who split up Alexander the Great's empire after his death.

In John's vision, the new beast, Rome, rose from the sea.

For the churches in Asia Minor, particularly the coastal city of Ephesus,

this imagery would be very meaningful.

Every year, the governor from Rome would arrive at Ephesus

and parade up a long boulevard to the main theater.

To the citizens of Ephesus, the governor and his entourage

would appear to rise up out of the sea.

So for John and his readers, like those of Daniel,

this beastly image represents domination by powers

that try to lead them to forsake their faith.

In Daniel's time, it was violating their dietary laws

by eating unclean animals and worshipping idols in their ruler's image.

In John's time, it was also eating food they shouldn't,

food sacrificed to pagan Gods.

They also were expected to participate in civic religious festivals,

honoring Caesar as a god and Lord.

There's good reason why throughout the New Testament,

Christ was referred to as "Lord;"

that was a direct slap in the face to the Romans,
who only referred to their emperor-god as “Lord.”

So how do we apply this to our time and place?

Who are the empires that seek to lead us astray?

As I mentioned earlier, this was first and foremost a letter
to seven different congregations.

And in the preamble of that letter,

John highlights the good and bad in each community of believers.

One common theme that runs throughout is criticism of those
in many of these communities of dual allegiance.

In other words, for six days a week they are good little Roman citizens,
going to civil worship and fitting in with the crowd
while others among them are being persecuted
for sticking to the Jesus path..

Then on Sunday they come to worship like good little Christians
and sit amid those who have suffered for their faith.

Obviously our circumstances in our culture are a little different.

We aren't dominated by a foreign empire that oppresses us.

However, that doesn't imply

that we don't make the same mistakes
our first century brothers and sisters made
by going “along with the flow.”

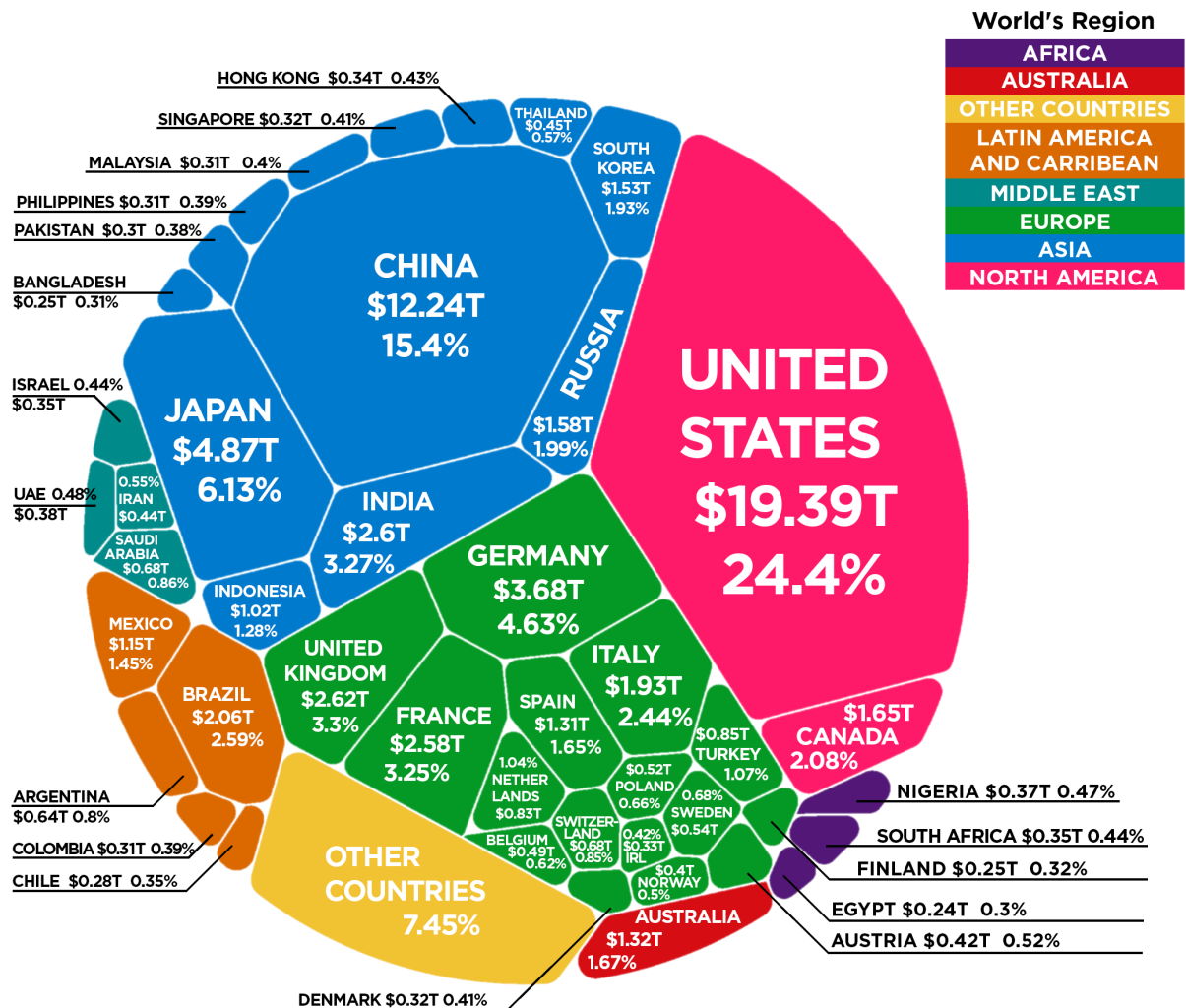
We need to take a good hard look at who the empires of today are

and how we may support their domination and oppression across the globe.

Who are the Romes of today?

The World Economy

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by Country 2017



Article and Sources:

<https://howmuch.net/articles/the-world-economy-2017>
<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>

howmuch.net

Like our early forebears, we need to think about whose policies

run contrary to the intentions of our Creator.

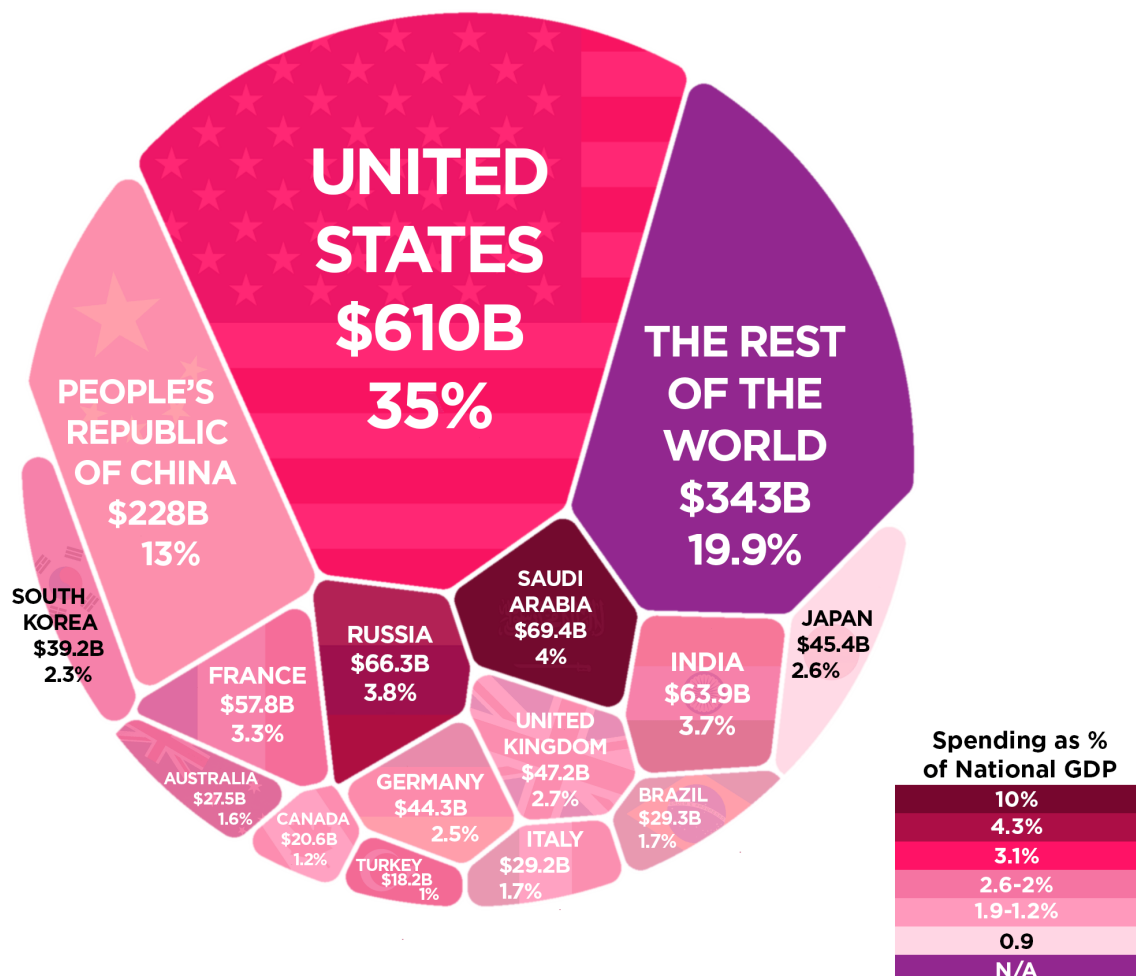
Who maintains and promotes peace through the use of force and intimidation,

like the Pax Romana or Peace of Rome?

Who lifts up idols to worship, not of pagan gods, but of consumerism and greed?

The World's Spending on War

Total Spending per Country and % of Worldwide Spending



Article and Sources:

<https://howmuch.net/articles/worlds-spending-war>
https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/sipri_fs_1805_milex_2017.pdf

howmuch.net

You may think I'm zeroing in on one particular country in particular,

and certainly one rises above the rest,

however the fact remains that a big gap exists

between a select group of nations and the rest of the world.

As I've mentioned many times, resources on this planet are finite,

If one group has more, that means another has less.

And how is that gap maintained?

You'll notice there seems to be a correlation

between military spending and the overall piece of the pie

each country acquires.

Over the next week, let's give some thought as to who those Romes are today,

and how do we, like our counterparts in first century Asia Minor,

"go with the flow"

and fall into the hype and propaganda and revel in the idols of today.

May we all take time to discern the beasts of our time and our part with them. Amen.