

COUNTERFEITING IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION AS A PERSPECTIVE ON NON-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

VERN S. POYTHRESS*

Since we are engaged in spiritual warfare today, Revelation's picture of spiritual war offers a significant way of engaging in critical interaction with modern culture.

Let us first note some of the salient features of spiritual war in the book of Revelation.

I. COUNTERFEITING

As others have recognized, the satanic forces in Revelation counterfeit the Trinity.¹ Satan is preeminently a counterfeit of God the Father. The beast, a kind of pseudo-incarnation of Satan, is a counterfeit unholy warrior opposed to Christ the holy warrior (compare Rev 13:1–10 to 19:11–21). The false prophet is a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit. By his deceiving signs the false prophet promotes worship of the beast. His actions are analogous to the manner in which the Holy Spirit works miracles in Acts to promote allegiance to Christ. Babylon the harlot is a counterfeit of the Church, the bride of Christ.

The beast counterfeits Christ in a striking number of ways. He has a counterfeit resurrection in the form of a mortal wound that was healed (Rev 13:3). The miraculous character of his healing creates astonishment and followers for him, just as the miracle of the resurrection creates followers of Christ. The beast has ten crowns (13:1), parallel to Christ's many crowns (19:12). The dragon gives the beast "his power and his throne and great authority" (13:2), just as the Father gives the Son his authority (John 5:22–27). Worship of the dragon and the beast go together (Rev 13:4), just as worship of the Father and the Son go together (John 5:23). The beast claims universal allegiance from all nations (Rev 13:7), just as Christ is Lord over all nations (7:9–10).

Moreover, the beginning of Revelation 13, which introduces the beast, sets forth a parody of creation. Satan stands "on the shore of the sea" and calls up from the sea a beast in his own image, with seven heads and ten horns corresponding to the seven heads and ten horns of the dragon (12:3).

* Vern Poythress is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, P.O. Box 27009, Philadelphia, PA 19118.

¹ See e.g. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974) 207.

Just as the Son is the image of the Father, so the beast is the image of the dragon. In addition, the imagery of the sea alludes to the time when God called forth an ordered creation from the water (Gen 1:2). Thus the dragon is a counterfeit creator, aping the creative activity of God the Father.

In this counterfeiting work lies both danger and hope. The danger is that the counterfeit can be mistaken for the true. Idolatry, as a counterfeit of true worship, is close enough to the truth to attract people and ensnare them. On the other hand, hope comes from the fact that counterfeiting expresses the dependence and failure of evil. Satan is not a second creator but only a counterfeiter. And he is a poor one at that, because his imitations are hideous. Can anyone in his right mind, with eyes open to the true nature of Satan's imitations, still honestly want to follow him?

II. IDOLATRY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Let us now consider how counterfeiting functioned with the original audience of Revelation, the Christians in the seven churches of Asia (Rev 1:4). The beast represented the Roman empire in its godlessness and idolatrous claims.² The worship of the beast was an issue because the Roman government expected all the subjects of the empire to participate in the cult of emperor worship. By doing so, people demonstrated their allegiance and their political submission.

The false prophet most likely represented the priests of the imperial cult and perhaps others who supported it. Babylon the harlot represented the city of the world in its economic might as well as its luxury and debauchery. Babylon was preeminently Rome. But the seductions of Rome were reflected also in the seductions of each of the seven cities where the seven churches were located.

In effect, the temptations to idolatry took two complementary forms: brutality and seduction. On the one hand the beast threatened death if you did not worship him. On the other hand the harlot promised pleasures and ease if you joined with her. Joining with the pagan life of the city involved an enticement. Social and economic well-being seemed to demand participation in the idol-saturated social life of the city, and literal harlots offered their physical pleasures on the street corners. You confronted options of power or powerlessness, pleasure or suffering, riches or poverty.

In response, God called on the churches to persevere in their allegiance to him: Be faithful in witness over against the threats of the beast. Be faithful in purity over against the seductions of the prostitute.

III. GENERALIZING THE PATTERN

We can generalize the pattern beyond the first century. After all, Satan is always and inevitably a counterfeiter: "Satan himself masquerades as an

² See e.g. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*; L. Morris, *Revelation* (London: Tyndale, 1969); and many other commentaries.

angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). He has no other choice. He is not the Creator. Hence he can only be an imitator, a counterfeiter of God's majesty, glory and power. Since God is always the same, the ways of Satan are in fundamental respects always the same. Hence in harmony with the idealist approach to Revelation it is possible to generalize and apply Revelation today. Indeed, Revelation asks for such application: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This application is possible whatever one's opinion may be with respect to the major schools for interpreting Revelation. Thus futurists as well as preterists and historicists may join with idealists in reflecting on the more general principles. They may nevertheless continue to disagree about when and where the principles have their primary fulfillment or embodiment.

Let us begin with the beast. In the first century, as we have said, the beast represented Roman persecution and the call to worship the Roman emperor. Moreover the principal Biblical background for the beast in Rev 13:1–10 is the four beasts of Daniel 7, representing four successive world empires, four empires with idolatrous leanings and power to persecute the people of God.

In our day the most obvious or direct manifestations of the beast are found in oppressive governments. Strong-arm governments make quasi-idolatrous claims. In their heyday communist governments around the world demanded total obedience from their subjects. They offered a counterfeit ideology with its own philosophy of history (dialectical materialism), its version of sin (economic wrongs), its version of final hope (the utopian communist society of the future), its authoritative writings (in China, above all Mao's *Red Book*), its quasi-ecclesiastical vanguard subsociety (the communist party).

Strong-arm governments of the right may also be oppressive. Saudi Arabia and Iran prescribe the death penalty for anyone who converts from Islam to Christianity.

Consider also the prostitute. As one can see from the activity of the prophetess Jezebel in Rev 2:20–23, the prostitute represents seduction to literal sexual immorality, to the spiritual adultery of idolatry, and to the luxury of the Roman empire luring believers into compromise with idolatry. The prostitute also has her manifestations in our day. Big cities in the west offer a host of pleasures in anonymity. The atmosphere asks no questions about absolute right and wrong. In addition consumerism threatens to make the pursuit of money into an idol. We worship not only money but also things and pleasures that money can provide. To crown the parallelism with the harlot imagery of Revelation, attention to sexuality pervades America, giving out the subtle message that sexual pleasure is an end in itself, the crowning pleasure of a hedonistic society. The prostitute stands for false worship of this kind, but she may also find embodiment in false churches: Modern liberal theology is a manifestation of the prostitute.

The lessons here parallel what sociologists could tell us. Idolatry can be and is institutionalized. Idolatry is of course a practice or temptation for individuals. But it involves more than individuals in isolation. Idolatry pervaded the social structures, the atmosphere, the assumptions of first-century

Asia Minor in a way that is difficult for a modern secularized westerner to conceive of.

Secularization has supposedly freed us from the power of religions and therefore from idolatry. But as Jacques Ellul and Herbert Schlossberg perceive, the truth is that secularization dispenses with gross physical idols in order to make way for more subtle idols.³ We give whole-souled commitment and blind trust to technique or state power or progress or revolution or sex or money or liberal theology. The more recent demons may be worse than the earlier ones (Matt 12:43–45). And the new idolatry travels in its subtlety through institutions. The institutions of power include civil government, industry, and the channels controlling money. But the knowledge industry has also more than ever developed institutions of power: the mass media, advertising, political propaganda, educational institutions. The false prophet is at work. These large-scale institutions give out a message that is reinforced by the voices of friends and neighbors who too often advocate and obey the same view of the world that the large institutions represent.

IV. SUBTLE IDOLATRY

Let us distinguish explicitly between blatant and subtle forms of idolatry. The most blatant forms include literal worship of the emperor or head of state, or literal worship of sexual union, as was the case in sacred sex found in ancient temple prostitution. But more subtle forms exist as well. Communism is officially atheistic but nevertheless requires a totalitarian commitment to the state. Such commitment is ultimately religious in character. The modern city is officially secular but seduces us into giving an ultimate commitment to pleasure and self-fulfillment.

Once Revelation has attuned us to the character of idolatry we can detect still more subtle forms. Modern democratic states officially eschew the totalitarian claims and practices of communism. But state power still has idolatrous attraction. If problems are severe, people feel that state power must be the answer, the deliverer. Despite the repeated failures of national government bureaucracies to manage adequately the multitudinous cares of citizens, people look to the state as if it were their Messiah. If there are problems with economic prosperity, with physical health, with guaranteeing comfort in old age, with poverty, with racial discrimination and prejudice, let the national state take care of it. Look at the immensity of its power. Where can we better invest our hopes than in this concentration of power? "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" (Rev 13:4).

Likewise the advertisers of the modern market would laugh at the primitivism of ancient sacral sex and religious orgies. But the visual pictures of advertising covertly promise that if you use their product you will have sexual fulfillment: "Listen, men, this product will cause beautiful women to flock around you."

³ J. Ellul, *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury, 1975); H. Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983).

In fact the beast and the harlot in Revelation are universal symbols. They speak of the allure of power, riches and pleasure. Who has not been snared? Subtle forms of idolatry worm their way into the lives of Christians. We thought that we surrendered the lust for power when we gave our lives to Christ. Perhaps only much later do we become aware of the way in which we enjoy a thoughtless and sometimes brutal exercise of power over our family or our colleagues. Or we find ways of gaining power through emotional manipulation rather than through direct confrontation.

We thought that we surrendered the lust for riches when we committed ourselves to tithing. But we only later become aware that we greedily claim the remaining nine-tenths as fully ours. We thought that we surrendered lust for pleasure when we agreed in our heart to follow the ten commandments and live by Christian standards rather than self-projected standards. We only later become aware that in subtle ways we still selfishly grasp for pleasures at the expense of others, always within the framework of obeying the letter of the law.

Christians as well as non-Christians can be attracted not only by false promises of self-centered pleasure but also by false promises of salvation. Ideologies can offer their own forms of counterfeit salvation. Marxism promises to save us from economic sin and the worship of money by taking charge of our economics and our money and distributing everything fairly. We cannot master our own lust for riches, so the Marxist system will step in and do it for us.

Feminism promises to save us from the agonies of sexual confusion and lust. We cannot master our own sexual lust or shame or confusion, so feminism will produce a renovation of society that will tell us how to treat one another. In one form of feminism, sexuality is mere plumbing. If we overcome the distortions of our past we will find that we are really all identical. Then there is no problem. In another form, if we only allow everyone to do his or her own thing, with no stereotypes or false moralisms, we will be all right.

We are searching for liberation. Deep down we know, though we may seldom admit it, that all is not well and that our beings are tangled, distorted, impoverished, frustrated. We want relief. And if the way in Christ is too painful, too humiliating, too incredible, too slow, we will grasp for alternatives. The alternatives are thus alternative ways of salvation: They are idols.

Forms of the beast and the harlot meet us not only in societal institutions but also in individualized, psychological fears and desires. We are driven negatively by fear and positively by lust. On the one hand the beast represents the temptation to worship idols through fear. We fear pain, humiliation, punishment, or the opinion of others. Fear turns us away from worshiping God and toward bowing down to whatever threatens us. On the other hand the harlot represents the temptation to worship idols that seduce us and promise pleasure. Lust turns us away from worshiping God and toward bowing down to whatever entices us with the promise of intense thrill or satisfaction. For each person the fears and the lusts may have slightly different texture. So each person experiences idolatry in slightly different forms. But all of us struggle with variants of the two idolatries of fear and lust, beast

and harlot. God calls us to reject these idolatries in favor of the true fear, the fear of God, and the true desire, the desire for the satisfactions of God's presence (Rev 22:1–5).

In short, the idolatries depicted in Revelation, as well as the true worship in Revelation, have both corporate and individual, blatant and subtle dimensions. In his commentary on Isaiah 13 Oecolampadius understands both sides. Corporately, "neither can Christians refrain from rejoicing with good hearts, if Rome [a corporate Babylon] should ever put an end to its tyranny." On the individual level, "through him [Christ] every day we conquer Babylon in ourselves."⁴

We should note also that idolatry has an historical dimension. Idolatries develop and fail within the nexus of historical development and judgment. Apostate Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. Rome in its official commitment to paganism passed away with Constantine's conversion. Its corruptions were destroyed in other senses with the removal of the imperial capital to Byzantium (AD 330) and the sack of Rome in 410. We could look at still other events that broke the hold of idolatry.

The two greatest events are the resurrection of Christ and the second coming of Christ.⁵ But between them we can find many other judgments that are shadows of the two great judgments. Through these two great events God also breaks the power of idolatry on a smaller scale day by day: The Holy Spirit brings Christ to us and applies his work to us. We die and receive Christ's resurrection (Col 2:20–3:4; 2 Cor 4:10–12; Phil 3:10–11). Through fellowship with Christ God transforms us in our individuality, our families, our churches, our communities, our institutions.

V. DECEIT AND BLINDNESS

Now let us look at ways in which idolatry affects our knowledge. Idolatry corrupts our understanding of God, sometimes blatantly, sometimes subtly. But whether subtle or blatant, idolatry blinds and deceives those who practice it. Idolaters fool themselves into thinking that they are worshiping God, or at least worshiping some god. They worship that which seems to them to deserve their worship. They develop blindnesses to what they are really doing and the foolishness of it. As Ps 115:4–8 points out, idols not only have mouths that cannot speak and eyes that cannot see but also promote blindness and dumbness in their worshipers: "Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them" (v. 8).

But this blindness never amounts to a mere vacuum, an innocent absence of knowledge. We grasp the counterfeit, the substitute, only because it

⁴ J. Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam Prophetam HYPOMNEMATON, hoc est, Commentariorum, Ioannis Oecolampadii Libri VI* (Basel: Andreas Cratander, 1525) 105a.

⁵ Oecolampadius rightly points to these two greatest historical events: "Again, how greatly it pertains to faith and hope, that once Babylon was devastated by Christ, and all liberty was restored, for he says: Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world [John 16:33]." "However, a full and true overthrow of the world will take place at the end of the ages of this world" (ibid.).

is a counterfeit to the true God. The counterfeit is attractive only because it imitates God. We love the counterfeit only because we cannot escape God and depending on him. The alternative to worshiping God is not worshiping nothing but worshiping a substitute, a counterfeit. And the counterfeit must be a successful enough counterfeit to give the illusion of satisfying the needs and longings that we have for God.

Moreover the counterfeit shows its dependence in the very act of counterfeiting. The beast is who he is only as a counterfeiter of Christ's power and Christ's resurrection (Rev 13:3). But his bestial character also proclaims his inferiority to Christ. As creatures, people instinctively know they should worship Christ. They show it when they worship the beast, who is a counterfeit of Christ. But as sinners, people prefer the counterfeit to the truth. Hence we do not escape God even in the act of idolatry. Rather, we display that we still ought to worship the original Creator. We know God and simultaneously distort and suppress that knowledge (Rom 1:18–32).

In this situation it is important to note that idolatry is not a wholly self-conscious, clearheaded, deliberate act of worship. In fact idolatry always involves deceit and therefore confusion. We confuse God with idols. Our thinking and acting become darkened. Hence when we serve idols we are not fully aware of every aspect of what we are doing. Particularly in the modern secular world, where the idols are more subtle and less visible, idol worship may be tacit in character.⁶ Idolatry corrupts our thinking and action, and the corruption results in our being unaware of the fact that it is corruption.

As Christians we live lives and think thoughts that contain confusing mixtures of true allegiance and idolatry, truth and its counterfeits. We excuse ourselves by pointing to the fragment of truth that is left in our counterfeit version, or by congratulating ourselves on the truth that we hold and by using it as a cover for a little indulgence in counterfeiting.

VI. THE REMEDY FOR COUNTERFEITING

Thus sin has roots deep within us. It so subtly and alluringly entangles our hearts. Who will deliver us completely?

According to the Biblical message, deliverance comes not through a mechanical recipe but through crucifixion with Christ: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23–24). Crucifixion takes place once and for all in our union with Christ: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24). "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:14). At the same time, union with Christ results in continual life through fellowship with his crucifixion: "We

⁶ The work of M. Polanyi distinguishes helpfully between explicit and tacit knowing, focal and subsidiary awareness (*Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958]; *The Tacit Dimension* [London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1967]).

always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2 Cor 4:10; cf. 1:8–11; Phil 3:10).

In the book of Revelation this union comes to bear in many ways. It is expressed in holding fast to the "testimony of Jesus," in endurance even to the point of martyrdom, in the joy of having access to the presence of God's heavenly throne. In true worship as mediated through Jesus Christ we put away idols. And in the satisfaction of fellowship with God we put away the seductions of the world. Instead of the beast's power we look to the power of God's throne. Instead of the harlot's luxury we look to the riches of the new Jerusalem. Instead of the harlot's sexual enticement we look to the pleasure of the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Thus Revelation empowers our spiritual warfare not only by revealing the devices of Satan but also by providing a continuing remedy in God himself—until we experience consummate triumph over sin and evil in the new Jerusalem.

VII. WINNOWING TRUTH FROM ERROR

What may we learn from Revelation about interacting with the world of ideas? The world of ideas, like all other aspects of this world, contains counterfeiting. We find subtle mixes of truth and error. Moreover the counterfeiting is institutionalized, so that when we are immersed in a particular culture we may be unaware of it. Yet this counterfeiting contains spiritual poison.

In our reaction, two extremes are possible. On the one hand we may see only the evil of the counterfeit. We react by withdrawing from involvement with the world as much as possible. But we fail to learn from the fragments of truth in the counterfeits. And without the benefit of truths complementary to the ones most comfortable to us we create subtle forms of counterfeiting even within our own ghetto. We are like the monk who renounces the world and goes to the desert, only to find that the world is still in his own heart.

On the other hand we may too readily accept the world's ideas. If we fail to pay deep attention to the counterfeiting we end up swallowing spiritual poison. We see the fragment of truth in non-Christian positions, but the truth becomes a bait to induce us to swallow the hook of idolatrous error.

The book of Revelation promotes spiritual health by giving us a vision of God and his ways that informs us both of the wealth of his truth, present throughout his creation, and the subtle enticements of the counterfeiting of his truth. It also assures us by proclaiming the certainty of the final defeat of this appalling deceit. But the battle is not merely intellectual. It involves our whole being. The work of scholarship does not represent a safe retreat in which rationality may function in an unconfused manner but rather one area among many in which the cosmic battle goes on in full force.